Examining innovative methods to improve mental health in the workplace

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Contents

About this report

Employers play a critical role in the lives of employees, particularly when it comes to their health. Covid-19 brought this role into focus. While employers are increasingly embracing the need to address mental health in the workplace, taking action to support mental health needs is an area ripe for innovation.

"Examining innovative methods to improve mental health in the workplace" discusses the growing need for workplace mental health intervention, explores findings from in-depth research related to workplace mental health programs and presents a series of evidence-based strategies for improving workplace mental health outcomes, across four domains. Each domain represents a key, evidence-based area for intervention for employee mental health:

• Build a supportive workplace

• Improve ways of working

• Meet employees where they are

• Expand beyond the workplace

Taken together, the four domains serve as a comprehensive blueprint for improving mental health outcomes for employees.

This analysis brings together findings from a series of research components including an in-depth literature review and desk research, expert interviews, focus group discussions and a social media listening exercise. Alongside this report is a methodology note, which describes the approach and framework for this research in greater detail. In addition, the evidence-based strategies - and innovative, real-world examples of their use - are detailed on our interactive hub at **impact.economist.com/health/workplace-mental-health**

We would like to thank the experts who kindly shared their time and insights in support of this project (in alphabetical order):

• **Julia Anas**, chief people officer, Qualtrics

• **Tracy Brower**, PhD, sociologist, author and Vice President of Workplace Insights, Steelcase

• **Kelly Greenwood**, founder and CEO, Mind Share Partners

• **Renny John**, Wellness program manager, Northwell Health

• **Michael P. Leiter**, Michael P. Leiter Professor Emeritus at Acadia University, Co-Author of The Burnout Challenge

• **Julie Paris**, Wellness program manager, Akamai Technologies

• **Dan Witters**, research director, Gallup National Health and Well-Being Index

Examining the current evidence: mental health at work

Most of us spend the majority of our waking hours working. Thus the jobs we do affect our lives both when we are at work and when we are not, with significant psychological impact. Job performance, productivity, relationships with coworkers and engagement with work can all be harmed by poor mental health.[1] And the impact of workplace mental health is not limited to the workplace: we take it with us at the end of the day. Workplace mental health impacts employees and employers, which means it also impacts society at large.

One key contributing factor is burnout. "Burnout has been around in its basic core form for quite a while," says Michael P. Leiter, Professor Emeritus at Acadia University, Co-Author of The Burnout Challenge. "We started in the seventies and eighties; we were looking at the similar kind of phenomenon of being exhausted, getting cynical or grumpy, getting very discouraged, and that cluster of things. Those are a three-part syndrome that define burnout. That's been around for a while."

The burden of poor mental health in the US is substantial and worsening. In 2019, before the start of the covid-19 pandemic, 59% of US adults reported having at least one symptom of mental illness. By 2021 this number had risen to 76%, representing an increase of 17 percentage points in just two years.[2] This impact is apparent in the workplace: employees now feel more distracted, stressed and overwhelmed. Some 71% of surveyed employees reported difficulties concentrating at work in 2022, a notable increase from 46% in 2018.[3]

But workplaces are also a source of mental health challenges, rather than simply a location where they manifest. In fact, 58% of employees say their job is the main source of their mental health challenges.[4] Less than two-thirds (65%) of employees say work processes enable them to be productive, while 38% feel burned out and 34% are emotionally drained from their work.[5] Conversely, 63% of people with a good work-life balance are willing to go above and beyond, compared with 29% with a poor work-life balance. A positive work-life balance also leads to benefits in a range of other areas, including well-being, engagement with work and staff retention.[5]

Rightly, concerns about workplace mental health—and the potentially negative impact of the workplace—have been acknowledged by both employers and employees. As the diagnosis of mental health symptoms has increased, so has interest in creating workplaces that can mitigate the impact of adverse mental health conditions and create a healthy environment in which to spend the workday.[3] Employees are now more likely to leave unhealthy workplaces and seek new opportunities. According to Mental Health America, 56% of employees surveyed spent time in 2021 looking for a new position, an increase of 16% since 2018.[3] Similarly, 81% of people surveyed by the American Psychological Association said that support for mental health in the workplace is a factor they will consider when seeking job opportunities in the future.[6] Clearly, it behooves, employers to

understand how workplace factors contribute to mental health outcomes for their employees.[3]

Fortunately, employers appear to be more responsive to mental health needs than they have been historically. In the same survey by the American Psychological Association, seven in 10 employees reported that "their employer is more concerned about the mental health of workers than before."[6] However, there is more work to be done: one study found that only 26% of respondents "agreed that employees could speak openly about mental health issues" in the workplace, and nearly 82% felt there were considerable unmet needs in the area of workplace mental health.[7] Given the clear benefits for both employers and employees that arise from supporting good mental health in the workplace, there is ample incentive for action.[5]

"Boomers had this kind of problematic leadership at work, and they put up with it more. They got burned out, but it wasn't quite as intense. But I

think that people entering the workforce now are less tolerant of that," says Dr. Leiter. This reduced tolerance has resulted in a wake-up call for executives to address mental health concerns in the workplace. "If you step back and consider the landscape that we're in and all the things that are rapidly changing, there are quite a few different pressures that are placed on humans," says Julie Anas, chief people officer at Qualtrics. "Our data from 2021 highlight that burnout, depression and anxiety are the most common symptoms of mental health challenges. In 2022, 58% of employees who participated in a separate study shared that work plays a role in that. When you think about it, addressing that burnout is really important."

The shift in thinking about mental well-being at work creates a unique opportunity for innovations in workplace mental health. The aim of this research is to better understand the changing landscape of mental health at work and highlight emerging innovation in workforce mental health and well-being, giving us a better understanding of successful interventions while highlighting best practices and opportunities for improvement.

This report looks closely at four key areas, with a particular eye on actions and innovations that aid progress in each. These are:

- Build a supportive workplace
- Improve ways of working
- Meet employees where they are
- Expand beyond the workplace

Our findings draw on a review of recent literature and interviews with experts in the field. Equally important, if not more so, are employees themselves. With this in mind, we convened a series of focus groups to ensure that workers' voices, and those of their employers, remained central to our analysis. Finally, we conducted a social listening exercise to capture a wider view of the current discourse among a broader set of stakeholders.

Making the workplace work: key domains and innovations for employee mental health

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "the workplace can be a key location for activities designed to improve well-being among adults."[1] Mentally healthy workplaces are associated with lower stress, decreased rates of depression and higher work engagement, regardless of individual mental health conditions.[8,9] These positive outcomes also extend to employers, who see a positive return on investment from mentally healthy staff.[9]

The employee focus group participants had mixed feelings about the support they receive at work. On the one hand, there was a general acknowledgement that employers seem more concerned about mental health than they were in the past. On the other hand, resources and coverage for mental health care is lacking. The literature generally documents wellness programs' positive efficacy on employee mental health and wellness but focus group participants consistently voiced that even companies with wellness programs that are robust are not doing enough to support employees' wellness. Many participants expressed that this was the case because many companies have tried to either have a one-size-fits-all approach, but many participants simultaneously expressed that this was also true because wellness programs do not always account for workload, client pressures, and the stressors of time-sensitive assignments.

Wellness programs can include support for employees with existing mental illnesses, managing stress at work and prevention programs that connect individuals with treatments or support services when needed.[1] The following sections focus on four domains of innovation in workplace mental health that may improve outcomes for employees, employers and wider society.

Worplace mental health: listening in on social media

As part of this study, we gathered social media conversations on Twitter about mental health in the workplace, analyzing key topics and sentiments related to mental wellbeing at work. Our initial search returned over 98k tweets. We performed in-depth analysis on a sample of 400 tweets. More information about the search can be found in the accompanying methodology note.

Overall, whether about advocating for mental health, sharing personal thoughts and opinions, spreading related content, or discussing specific programs, interventions or services, there was wide agreement among the public that support for mental health in the workplace has generally increased. However, there is a clear disconnect between what employers see as the cause of mental health challenges in the workplace (e.g., resources, programs), and what employees see as the problem (e.g., workload). Another trend seems to be skepticism among employees that verbal support for mental health will turn into real action.

Figure 1. Topical breakdown of social listening analysis
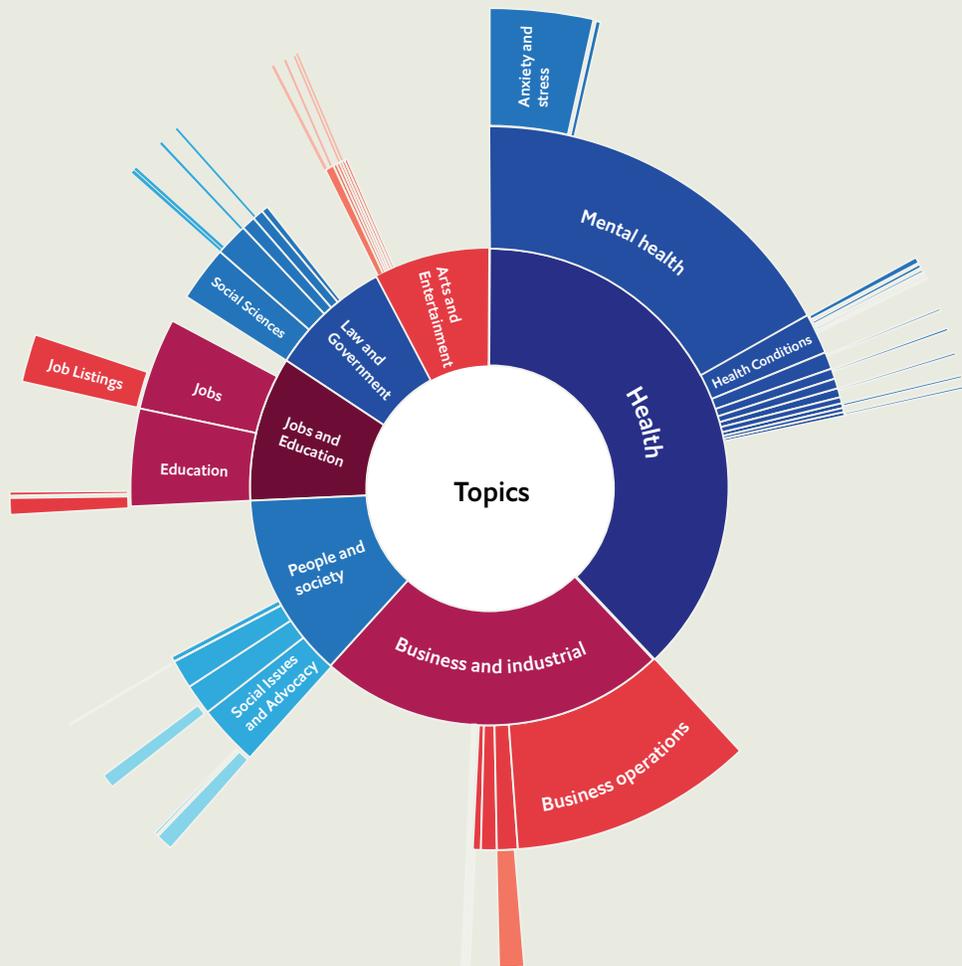
Figure 1 presents an indication of key topic areas of relevant social media posts. The inner ring represents top-tier themes, while rings further out represent greater specificity. In addition, the key topic areas identified through social media analysis illustrate the farreaching implications of workplace mental health: the effects of workplace mental health and impacts of related programs are not confined to the workplace. Rather, the benefits of a renewed focus on workplace mental health extend to areas like law and regulations, general health of individuals and families, business operations and community systems.

Figure 2 below presents a word cloud of key terms used within the tweets generated by our search. Beyond this, it characterizes the terms used by whether the sentiments of the tweets were positive or negative. Many of the terms included in the word cloud are repeated for both positive and negative sentiments. For example, terms like "community", "awareness", "life balance" and "support" were included in both positive and negative tweets. This finding indicates that conversations about workplace mental health are divided and employee feelings about current mental health programs are mixed, signaling a need for improved programs and renewed focus on strategies that are known to be effective in improving mental health outcomes for all employees.

Figure 2. Top sentiments related to workplace mental health
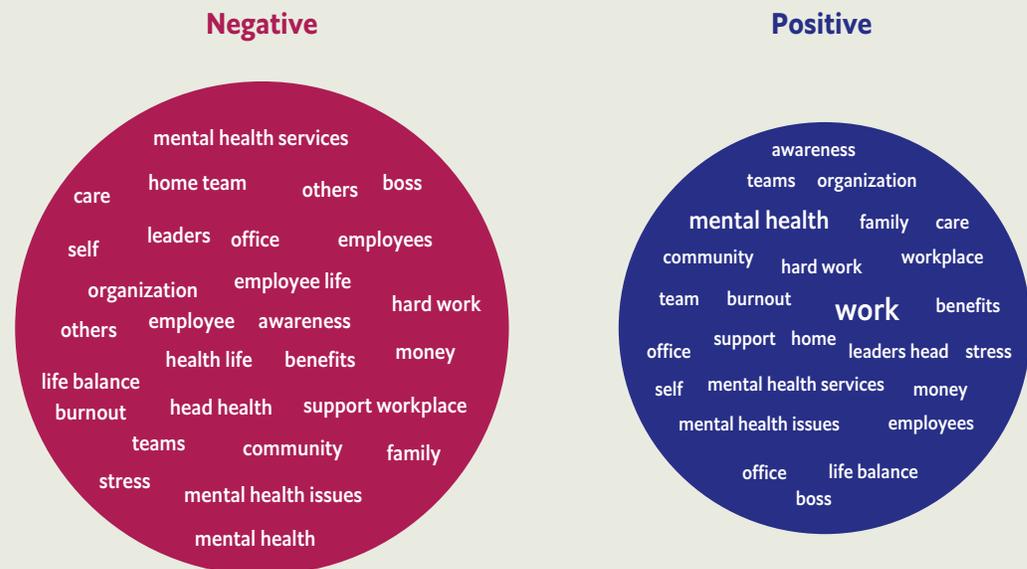
Further findings from our social media listening exercise can be found within the domain sections below.

Domain 1: build a supportive workplace

Workers are becoming increasingly aware of the links between their mental health and their work environment. In the same way that autonomy and meaningful work drive engagement and improve mental health, workers' well-being is tied to the culture of the company they work for. "From my observation, I think we sometimes forget about the basics [work/life harmony], we forget about the things that we really have access to at our fingertips, but instead we're focused on or distracted by that shiny object. 'How do I create this one moment that's going to make an impact, or be the one size fits all?' In this case, I don't see one that exists," explains Ms. Anas. A commitment to improving workplace culture to support mental health is necessary and can be nurtured by focusing on several areas, described below.

Adopt positive leadership practices

As well as addressing burnout, it is also important for companies to acknowledge that there may be issues other than overwork; this approach starts at the top. Senior leadership of an organization should normalize conversations about mental health to ensure an environment of transparency

and openness when it comes to mental health in the workplace.[10] Focus group employees for this study suggested the onus of prioritizing mental health initiatives should fall on leadership to create a sense of alliance in mental health initiatives, which fosters both top-down and bottom-up approaches to succeed. Employees also cited managers' power over workload and capacity, as well as messaging that feeds directly into workplace culture. Actions matter—when companies do make changes, even if seemingly small, employees notice. As noted above, the American Psychological Association reports that 71% of employees believe their employer is more concerned about the mental health of employees than in the past.[6]

Employers can support their employees by creating an appointed mental health leader to ensure that any programs are being effectively rolled out, expanding resources to all employee levels and expanding benefits, tailoring support programs to cater to the needs of specific groups within the organization, increasing communication networks and offerings within the organization, and working diligently to create an inclusive work culture that actively seeks to destigmatize the use of mental health resources.[11]

MicKinsey, operating in an industry traditionally plagued with barriers to mental well-being at work, recently established a framework for companies to address mental health challenges in the workplace; it points out that "leading by example can make a difference, with senior leaders stepping forward to describe personal struggles with mental health, using non-stigmatizing language. Leaders showing vulnerability helps to remove shame and promote a psychologically safe culture."[12]

The American Psychological Association notes that it is important to establish a committee to review employee assistance programs to ensure that employees are able to have their voice heard.[13] This creates an avenue for employees to define their wants and needs and for leadership to

take those wants and needs into account when developing programs. Once they have developed a program to address mental health needs in the workplace, employers should also take prompt steps to create self-assessment tools that are available to all employees.[1]

Involving leadership in delivering mental health programming is key, but it is also imperative to involve them in tracking the outcomes of any program that is rolled out so they can assess performance indicators and gauge the impact of programming.[14] Measuring mental health initiatives through performance indicators allows organizations to track programs and improve them.[15] Employers we spoke to pointed to the importance of tracking initiatives such as annual employee surveys, as well as being current on data related to broader health system challenges.

The US Surgeon General recently developed a framework for workplace mental health and well-being to help organizations support their employees. The report calls for using validated tools to track and evaluate workplace well-being. Firstly, tracking the impact allows leaders to discern what is working and what is not. Organizations can measure their programs by creating strict definitions of what kind of impact amounts to "success."[15] Second, leaders and executives must be held accountable to ensure that the program has results at every level in the organization. Third, companies should create rigorous measurements of success concerning improvement, uptake, awareness and utilization.[15] All these actions should create independent data that companies are able to pull from to understand their program and its effects.

While measurement is crucial, it is also important to note that evaluation needs to be taken a step further and understood in context. Tracy Brower, a sociologist studying work-life fulfilment and happiness, raises an important concern about measuring use of employee assistance programs and how that is considered in assessing workplace

mental health. "Measurement can always be improved. I think the best measurements are the ones that ladder up to organizational outcomes, but sometimes it can be challenging to make that connection to retention or performance," says Dr. Brower. "I also worry that if you focus too much on the quantitative metrics, you might lose meaningful insights because sometimes the most important things we do are harder to measure." Dr. Brower cites goodwill and working culture as examples of important factors that might not be well measured by quantitative assessments such as surveys. "I think we need to be careful that we don't create an over-reliance on quantitative over qualitative metrics and that we don't overvalue the things that we can count, because there is value in some things that we may not be able to count as easily," says Brower. Indeed, the US National Institutes of Health identify educational interventions and systematic assessments as vital components of successful mental health programming.[16]

Foster community and peer engagement

Workforce engagement is a human resources concept defined as the emotional investment, involvement and enthusiasm that employees feel toward their workplace.[17,18] Strong workforce engagement requires ongoing consideration of employee perspectives on the work environment and the work they are doing. As such, organizational leadership and human resource departments play the most significant roles in improving this metric.[19]

"There needs to be importance placed on the building of an engaging workplace. What do you do to build engagement?" says Dan Witters, Research Director of the Gallup National Health and Well-Being Index. "When it comes to engagement, we're mostly influenced by our managers, our direct report manager, and we're influenced by our peers. How we're influenced by our peers is also going to be influenced by what

our manager says and does."

Employee engagement is, in some ways, distinct from other workplace mental health programs designed to specifically prevent or address the impact of mental health problems in the workplace. Instead, interventions to improve workforce engagement focus on promoting the positive aspects of work and employee capacity, including well-being.[20] While not a mental health intervention per se, employee engagement is positively associated with mental health.[21]

Key components of workforce engagement include employee perspectives on productivity, individual agency and opportunities for personal and professional growth, meaningfulness and peer engagement. In turn, each of these components has the potential to impact the mental health of employees and improve business outcomes.[18] The focus group employers cited the need to reconnect with their employees post- pandemic to help ease workers' anxieties or fears about returning to a more "normal" working environment. They also pointed to the need to be aware of mental health challenges created by future changes to working life.

The conversation: social listening

Employees who feel supported and valued are more likely to stay with a company long-term. Offering employee benefits such as health insurance, retirement plans and wellness programs can improve employee retention. #employeebenefits #employeeretention #wellness

- @opensourcedwor1, 6 Mar 2023, 10:00am, twitter.com

Workforce engagement presents an important opportunity for employers and human resource departments to increase productivity, improve ways of working and promote employee well-being.[18,19] Human resources professionals, who are well positioned to design training and programs to support employees, can play an important role in improving workforce engagement.[19]

Productivity, as opposed to hours spent working—which can reflect "jacket on the chair" culture, or presenteeism—is a reliable metric of workplace engagement.[22] If people are productive in their work, there is a good chance they are engaged with it—and that they are likely to be happier and healthier than less productive workers.

Address stigma

Stigmatization of mental health challenges is a concern that was raised by both employer and employee focus groups. Over the past ten years, there has been a revolution in how companies view mental health itself, echoing a wider openness to mental health across society (and, crucially, reflecting the demands of workers). This process must continue, with employers taking a dynamic approach that caters to the specific needs of their diverse workforce while evolving to reflect the most effective approaches.

The benefits are clear. Investment in wellness programs can show employers a greater level of productivity from employees.[23] These wellness programs also allow employees to be able to see overall mental and physical health improvements. When employees are able to talk about their problems in an effective way, they are better able to live healthier lives and encourage each other to have a healthy, meaningful and productive work life.[24] However, when they are not able to do so, many employees can begin to feel like they have been pushed aside or become a burden to their employer or colleagues.[6]

As with most elements of culture, workplace or otherwise, attitudes towards mental health are primarily defined by those in charge. Employees need to have a meaningful connection with their managers in order for attempts to destigmatize to be truly successful in the eyes of employees. Given the diverse backgrounds of employees on different levels, as well as the need for senior staff to focus on ensuring the overall success of the company they work for, this connection can be difficult to achieve. "What [managers] see is the life-and-death crises of this institution that they are keeping afloat through the work that they're doing, it's so disconnected with what their frontline people are dealing with, their crises and their issues," says Dr. Leiter. "There's a lot of perspective that puts huge gaps in between. Can you overcome that? …It's a big job to take it on. It's not just, 'Oh yeah, let's do a survey and then we'll talk with people and everything will be fine.'"

One option is to offer face-to-face workshops and interventions based on cognitive behavioral therapy, which has proven to be especially helpful when interacting with an employee who may have a mental health challenge.[7] These workshops become more effective if the manager has also spoken about a mental health issue they may have had, as it allows them to better relate to their employees. Experts from different countries and areas of expertise agree that these types of open communication channels are vital to tackling stigma.[7]

Efforts to destigmatize mental health for all in the workplace are crucial for fostering a positive workplace culture. Many workplaces have been adapting their mental health policies to create a more open and productive environment, notably through diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) practices. However, there is a danger (one that has been noted by employees) that DEI efforts are undertaken just "for show," or at least are perceived to be.[3] As companies begin to redefine their DEI policies, two things need to be considered: first, the current state of the DEI policies, and second, how practices can be innovated to have a larger and measurable impact on their business.

Addressing stigma must include culturally responsive care, which involves acknowledging and acting in accordance with the identity, background and experiences of individual people—whether in relation to sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity or other factors.[25] The employers we spoke to noted that this is true not only between individuals in a workplace but also in terms of cultural differences between offices, especially at multinational firms.

A Canadian workplace mental health initiative, The Working Mind, was designed to address workplace mental health by focusing on issues related to stigma.[26] The Working Mind offers two versions: one intended for frontline workers and the other for managers, ensuring that people of all employment levels are engaged in the program. The program offers extended discussions on how to have conversations about mental health challenges in the workplace, and it is designed to create a space for facilitators, workshop manuals, and videos that present real-life scenarios to ensure that managers are able to see how aspects of mental health in the workplace should be addressed.[26] A meta-analysis conducted about The Working Mind found that there are moderate reductions in stigma and increased self-reported resilience and coping abilities, findings that were consistent across multiple settings.

Domain 2: improve ways of working

Avoid and address burnout

Growing numbers of employees are leaving their jobs, citing mental health reasons caused by workplace factors such as an overwhelming and unsustainable workload, or burnout.[10] In 2021, nearly 68% of Millennials and 81% of Gen Z-ers leaving their roles cited mental health reasons, attrition rates that are much higher than their 2019 equivalents.[23] In 2019, WHO declared burnout an "occupational phenomenon."[27]

The landscape of burnout and workplace fatigue varies, but the unifying factor is that employees feel exhausted as a result of work. A 2020 study conducted by Gallup to understand the causes of and cures for employee burnout found that 28% of full-time employees reported feeling burned out at work "very often" or "always."[24] An additional 48% reported feeling burned out "sometimes" (see Figure 3).

The conversation: social listening

My life is just not built around what actually benefits my mental health AT ALL. I need to… have a job where I can take my laptop outside and have evenings to myself. I need weekend trips with friends. My current life is NOT it.

- @ Jenuhh124, 12 Jan 2023, 3:35pm, twitter.com

Burnout is expensive for employers: both individual and organizational performance are affected. Individually, employees are likely to take more sick days, be less open about their work performance, be more likely to seek a new job and to lose confidence (see Figure 4).[24]

Organizations must be clear that burnout reflects poor work culture rather than personal employee issues with strength or resilience. Workers themselves are increasingly aware of this difference, which has ushered in a change of approach.

The conversation: social listening

Lots of interesting data published by the @SlackHQ @FutureForum. Of note: the gender gap at work extends beyond compensation to burnout. Women are 32% more likely to experience burnout than their male counterparts. How is your org addressing this? https://t.co/HuAr5SiDZt https://t.co/rgCyfKID4X

- @amyspurling, 17 Nov 2022, 9:22am, twitter.com

Figure 3. Rates of burnout for employees[24]

How often do you feel burned out at work:
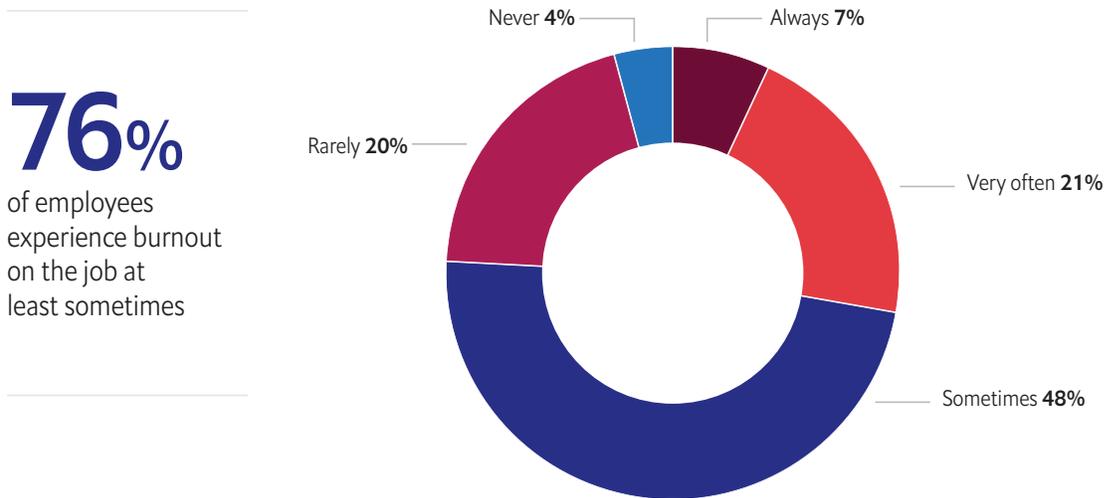
76% of employees experience burnout on the job at least sometimes

Never **4%**

Always **7%**

Very often **21%**

Sometimes **48%**

Rarely **20%**

Figure 4. The impacts of burnout[24]

Employees who say they very often or always experiences burnout at work are:

63% more likely to take sick day

23% more likely to visit the emergency room

13% less confident in their performance

1/2 as likely to discuss how to approach performance goals with their manager

2.6x as likely to be actively seeking a different job

Encourage autonomy, meaning and provide opportunities for growth

The CDC reports that happier and healthier employees are more productive, resulting in lower rates of both absenteeism and presenteeism.[2,28] Interventions designed to create a positive work environment can be successful in this area. A series of systematic reviews found that interventions intended to (a) reduce employee workload and stressors (primary prevention) and (b) equip employees to handle future stressors are most successful in combatting employee stress and improving work outcomes.[20]

Autonomy or agency in the workplace is positively associated with mental well-being.[29] Healthy levels of agency in the workplace mean that employees feel that they have ownership or control over their work and schedules.[30] Interventions that focus on work output, rather than hours spent working or adhering to strict schedules, have had some success in preventing burnout and improving productivity.[29] For example, Calibre Cleaning, an Australian house

cleaning company, adopted an "outcome-first approach to working" by giving employees the flexibility to determine their own schedules and ways of working.[30] In employee engagement surveys after implementation, employee satisfaction improved to 100% in some areas, including work pressure and feeling valued.[30] Interventions like these can improve outcomes for employees and help them to focus on their work outputs.

Employees also feel increased self-esteem and self-efficacy when they feel like the work they are doing is meaningful.[20] This can positively impact mental health outcomes and job retention. A UK study found that workers are more motivated to stay in the labor market when they feel they can use their skills, be creative and accomplish their professional goals than when they are motivated purely by financial security.[20] Interventions in this space can overlap with efforts to improve autonomy in the workplace.[30] Employers we spoke to pointed to the need to demonstrate true recognition and appreciation of workers, both for doing outstanding work and in relation to the mental health challenges they may face. Recognition can take the form of in-person forums, gift cards and offering access to mental health apps, among other benefits.

Domain 3: meet employees where they are

Support, prevention and mental health promotion

At its most fundamental, a positive workplace culture manifests as a sense of belonging among all of a company's employees. This broad sense of belonging, while perhaps a simple concept, must reflect and cater to the diverse workforce. "It's really important to make sure that employee needs are taken into account," says Kelly Greenwood, CEO of Mind Share Partners. "[As is] understanding every demographic group, and those at their intersections, experience mental health in the workplace differently." Renny John, Wellness Program Manager at Northwell Health, explains that many people do not always use their EAP because of a historical lack of counselors and medical staff who are minorities themselves. "Integrating a company's DEI calendar with their wellness calendar is one way to engage more employees. You have to get personal with what people need to ensure they show up and use the resources you are putting out there," explains John.

Demographics play an immense role in workplace mental health, especially as underrepresented groups struggle disproportionately with mental

health in the workplace.[10] In one recent survey, nearly 54% of respondents said they believe that mental health challenges in the workplace are a diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) issue, given how one's race, ethnicity and background affect daily lived experiences.[10] "There is an inextricable link between DEI and mental health. Mental health is a new category within DEI, [as is] how intersectional mental health is with all of our different identities," says Ms. Greenwood.

From 2020, Ms. Greenwood notes, workplace mental health support went from being perceived as a 'nice-to-have' to a true business imperative, driven by the onset of the pandemic and increased awareness of systemic racism driven by events such as the killing of George Floyd; awareness only increased as the pandemic wore on. Now, "a lot of organizations have increased their investment in a mentally healthy company culture," she says. "The big thing that we're really focused on is getting organizations to continue to shift their focus from viewing mental health as an individual employee responsibility [to seeing it as] a collective business priority and a core part of company culture."

Additionally, by being given a stake in the company they work for, workers are more likely to work harder for that company.[24,31] Trust and communication are an integral part of an inclusive workplace.[32] People want to know that their

voices are heard, and it remains critical that every manager build "an inclusive team environment by listening to their employees and recognizing them for their everyday efforts."[32]

The conversation: social listening

With today's tight labor market and shifting employee priorities, it's more important than ever for employers to get their #benefits right. Consider offering a program that promotes mental health and a great work-life balance. #TakeCareofYourPeople https://t.co/iM6bhLdorq https://t.co/dx6t7Gj1sk

- @JasonABanks4, 8 August 2022, 12:45pm, twitter.com

Employee resource groups

Companies can also facilitate employee efforts to foster a positive working culture. For example, employers can coordinate employee resource groups, which bring together people who self-identify under a defining characteristic such as race, sexual orientation or parental status, allowing them to develop a sense of unity and belonging in the workplace.[33] Perhaps because they encourage community without relying on a top-down approach, affinity groups are gaining traction as a means to promote mental health within the workplace. Many employees report feeling "a cultural disconnect" at work, so creating groups that may align with their race, ethnicity, sexuality or other self-reported characteristics can ease this disconnect that can often lead employees to look for other places of employment.[34] By having affinity groups, employees can create their own community of shared lived experiences, which can ease the feelings of isolation that are more common in larger companies.[32]
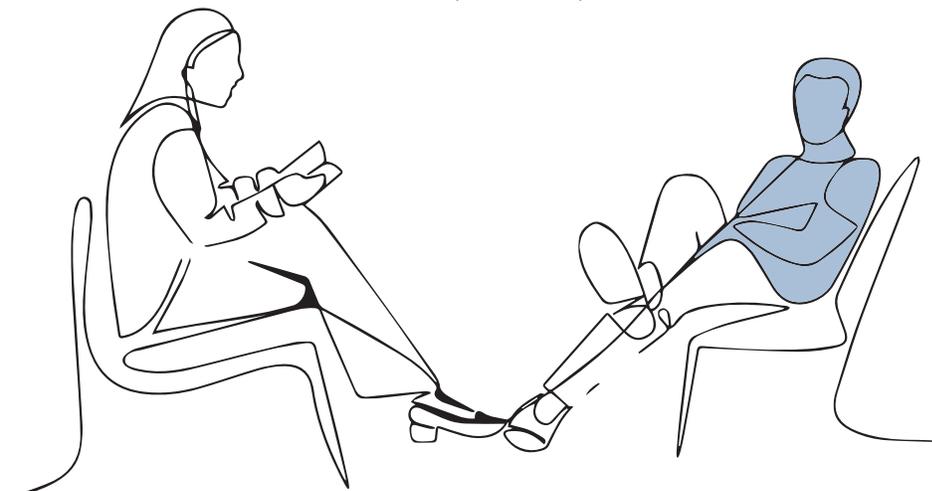
Communication

Employees' ability to feel heard is becoming increasingly central to enhancing their performance. Employees want to know that their manager cares about them and that they are willing to help employees address their concerns or problems.[24] Workers who do have those open communication channels in the workplace are 62% less likely to reach burnout.[24]

If a company does not take active steps to create an environment that can adapt and change based on employee feedback, then one of two things often happens: employees can either begin to feel like a burden, which only worsens their mental health, or they can become apathetic to the company as a whole.[31] If employees are not able to see and feel the changes that employers are proposing, then the environment will not have a measurable difference or improvement. Employees want to know what is happening with their company, but this is currently not happening to the extent needed. Limited channels of communication feed perceptions that DEI efforts and other attempts to improve or nurture workplace culture are just for show.[3]

The CDC suggests several actionable steps that companies can take to open effective communication channels for all employees[1]:

- Make mental health self-assessment tools available to all employees.

- Offer free or subsidized screenings for depression.

- Offer health insurance with no or low out-of-pocket costs for depression medications and mental health care.

- Distribute materials to all employees about the signs and symptoms of poor mental health and opportunities for treatment.

- Host seminars or workshops that address depression and stress management techniques.

- Create and maintain dedicated, quiet spaces for relaxation activities.

- Provide free or subsidized lifestyle coaching, counseling or self-management programs.

Steps such as these must be as impactful as possible, meaning that broader communication-related barriers must be addressed. Our employee focus groups pointed out that resources are not always easy to find or access, for example, and sometimes workers do not even know what is available. Their existence should be amplified and access processes simplified. Employers, too, emphasized the importance of openness and accessibility when it comes to breaking down barriers to accessing mental health resources. They also highlighted the importance of basic internal communication as part of this process.

Opening these windows of communication lets employees be fully present at work, safe in the knowledge that their input is valued and that they can express themselves freely. "Communication is key, having a culture of trust and psychological safety creates an environment where people feel like they can be themselves and openly share the challenges they are facing ," says Ms. Anas.

If companies are to design a work environment in which mental health can thrive, they will have to bring employees with them in terms of understanding how and why a company approaches the issue—and what workers' role is in those efforts. Staff at every level of seniority will need to know (a) how to best approach their own mental health and (b) how they can collectively contribute to a work environment that promotes mental health for all.

Ultimately, though, workers exist in the culture they arrive in, including efforts to make a workplace culture conducive to good mental health. Partly, then, there should be efforts by managers at all levels to use specific approaches through learning opportunities and progress monitoring to ensure the organization is accountable. "Accountability

has to be focused upon the direct managers, because they're the ones who are driving and most responsible for the follow-through and the things that we've committed to as a group to implement," says Mr. Witters.

"Ideally we want to have inputs from across the organization, so that it's not just seen as this HR [human resources] side issue but really, something that's embedded," adds Ms. Greenwood. "Secondly, from an accountability perspective, it's really important to have that tracking of the most important outcomes."

Domain 4: expand beyond the workplace

Achieve work-life balance

The pandemic introduced a host of factors that altered the workplace mental health landscape.[35] US culture tends to enable workaholism, or the compulsion to overwork.[10] Workaholism has been exacerbated by the pandemic as demands have changed; people may still be working from home or in a hybrid environment, which tends to mean working more and, potentially, overworking. Companies are responsible for (and benefit from) ensuring that workers maintain a healthy work-life balance while supporting their broader mental health. "[In a 2023 trends survey conducted by Qualtrics], 18% were more likely to continue working with their current job for three plus years and 16% less likely to be at risk of burnout, all by [contributing to] a good work-life balance," says Ms. Anas. "Ensuring employees have a good work-life harmony is something that companies don't have to have a fancy program to support, it's really about leveraging the basics that are at all of our disposal."

The US Surgeon General recently developed a framework for workplace mental health and well-being to help organizations support their employees.[2] There are five essentials for workplace well-being: protection from harm, connection and community, work-life harmony,

mattering at work, and opportunity for growth (see Figure 5).

It is important to recognize that work-life balance is as essential to workplace well-being and support as are opportunities for growth and building community. Comprehensive workplace programs encompass all these areas and are centered around employee perspectives and equity considerations.

The conversation: social listening

It's also important to note that hard work and dedication should be balanced with self-care and rest. Overworking can lead to burnout and negatively impact our mental and physical health. Taking breaks and engaging in leisure activities can help to maintain balance.

- @Stealthy_Trilli, 8 February 2023, 8:12am, twitter.com

Another support mechanism is increasing the options for employees to engage in flexible work. In a survey to assess workplace mental health, the American Psychological Association found that 34% of employees believe flexible hours help their mental health.[36] A 2021 Gallup poll also found that 54% of remote employees enjoy dividing time between home and office, while 37% say they want to keep working from home full time.[18] The flexibility of hybrid and virtual work supports employees as they seek to stay on top of their non-work responsibilities, which leaves them with less stress in and out of work.[36] That said, focus group employers also highlighted the need to be aware of the potential stresses arising from both remote work (too much screen time, for example) and the return to in-person working after the pandemic.

Figure 5. Practices and essentials for workplace well-being and support[2]

Protection
from harm
Safety, security

Connection
& community
Social support,
belonging

Opportunity
for growth
Learning,
accomplishment

Centered on
**Worker voice
and equity**

Work-life
harmony
Autonomy,
flexibility

Mattering
at work
Dignity,
meaning

For their part, employees raised concerns about workload—something that does not go away, and ultimately can increase, as a result of taking holidays or time off—as well as the feeling among some that they need to "prove" they are working, especially when working remotely. In terms of interventions, federal limits or policies on working were deemed potentially helpful (in Canada, for example, hours are limited to 44 per week, with overtime pay compulsory above that level). In terms of positive changes that employers can make, focus group employees suggested scheduling flexibility (including not having set hours of work), hybrid working and weekly capacity check-ins.

Putting it all together: evaluating strategies for action

Throughout this report, we have highlighted evidenced-based strategies for creating programs that can be most effective in improving mental health outcomes in the workplace and beyond. In this section, we have taken a deep dive into the strategies presented above and evaluated them to determine 1 their potential to improve mental health outcomes and 2 whether or not they satisfy the features of successful mental health programs detailed in The US Surgeon General's framework for workplace mental health & well-being.[2] Figure 6 displays this information and acts as a blueprint that employers stakeholders can use improve mental health outcomes for their employees.

How to use this tool

Stakeholders can start by identifying the area in need of intervention in column 1 (domain) of Figure 6. Within that intervention area, they can determine the action best suited to improve mental health for their workforce in column 2 (subdomain). Then, choose an evidence-based strategy to act as the starting point for new programs, using column 3 (evidence-based strategy). For example, an employer that has identified a need to build a supportive workplace to better serve employees (column 1) and feels that a lack of positive leadership practices is a specific pain point for their organization (column 2), can view strategies within that

subdomain as options to consider when creating a new workplace mental health program (column 3). In this way, employers and other stakeholders can ensure that new programs successfully address current concerns about mental health within their organizations and are well-suited to meet the needs of their workforce.

Strategy evaluation

The remaining columns serve as the evaluation of each strategy:

1. Potential to improve mental health outcomes as identified during our in-depth literature review and analysis of the evidence-base.

Strategies with three stars are those with a demonstrated impact and therefore, with the highest potential to improve mental health outcomes.

Strategies with two stars are those that fill a need identified through our analysis but have not necessarily been evaluated directly. We consider these strategies to have a considerable positive impact.

Strategies with weak impact potential would be assigned one star. Because we have focused our analysis on actionable, evidence-based strategies for intervention in workplace mental health, no strategies receive only one star.

2. Features of successful mental health programs as detailed in The US Surgeon General's framework for workplace mental health & well-being.[2]

As mentioned previously, the US Surgeon General's framework identifies six features of successful and comprehensive workplace mental health programs, centered on worker voice and equity, which we have discussed in our report as an existing framework for planning workplace interventions.

In addition to assessing each strategy's potential to improve mental health outcomes, we have also noted where the strategies align with the six features of successful and comprehensive programs.

It should be noted, however, that comprehensive workplace mental health programs encompass all six features identified by the Surgeon General's report. While none of our individual, evidence-based strategies satisfy all six requirements, they can be used in combination to create meaningful and comprehensive workplace mental health programs.

For more information about the criteria used to evaluate the evidence-based strategies presented in this report, see our methodology note.

To supplement the intervention blueprint presented in Figure 6, we have presented our evidence-based strategies for intervention - along with actionable, real-world examples of company programs that have utilized them - on our interactive hub. In combination, these tools can be used to help employers design effective and comprehensive workplace programs to improve the mental health and wellbeing of their employees.

Figure 6. Intervention blueprint: evaluation of strategies for workplace mental well-being

Domain	Subdomain	Evidence-based strategy	Potential to improve mental health outcomes	Protection from harm	Opportunities for growth	Connection and community	Mattering at work	Work/life harmony	Worker voice and equity
Build a supportive workplace	Adopt positive leadership practices	Appoint a designated mental health leader	★★★			x	x		
		Clarify and prioritize workplace mental health goals	★★			x			x
	Foster community and peer engagement	Create inclusive work culture from the top down	★★★			x			x
		Build systems of social support	★★★			x			
		Offer opportunities for team reflection	★★★			x			x
	Reduce stigma	Normalise mental health conversations	★★★	x		x			
		Use non-stigmatizing language	★★★	x					
Improve ways of working	Avoid and address burnout	Advocate for sustainable workloads	★★	x			x	x	
		Discourage workaholism	★★★	x				x	
		Create flexible work practices	★★					x	x
	Encourage autonomy and meaning	Focus on work output	★★★				x	x	
		Ensure work is meaningful	★★★				x		
		Provide opportunities to use skills and be creative	★★★		x				
	Provide opportunities for growth	Offer professional growth opportunities	★★◐		x				
		Encourage goal-setting	★★		x				
Meet employees where they are	Support employees with mental health challenges	Offer comprehensive mental health services	★★◐	x					x
		Identify employee mental health needs	★★	x					
		Expand employee mental health benefits	★★◐	x					
	Improve mental health promotion	Equip employees to handle future stressors	★★	x		x			x
		Focus on education	★★		x				
	Focus on prevention	Promote healthy activities	★★	x					
		Conduct regular evaluation of mental health and well-being among employees	★★★	x		x			x
Expand beyond the workplace	Achieve work/life balance	Offer opportunities for personal growth	★★★		x				x
		Encourage extra-curricular activities	★★		x			x	
	Ease external stressors	Expand general employee benefits	★★◐	x					x
		Provide needed services to reduce barriers to work	★★	x			x	x	x

The way ahead

The covid-19 pandemic brought a shift toward mental health and wellness in the workplace, and not just among employees. Workers today are prioritizing happiness and well-being over other factors when considering their professional options. They also need and expect more mental health support from employers than they have in the past. In response, companies are racing to keep up. Some employers have created comprehensive, innovative mental health programs to respond to employee needs, but more can be done.

Innovation in workplace mental health should evolve as companies gain a greater understanding of their role in promoting mental health, and of the needs among their workforce. Providing adequate support to employees can help reduce burnout and improve mental health outcomes while allowing companies to get a larger return on the investment.

The four domains discussed above provide a framework for companies that are trying to find an innovative approach to mental health. While there has been a surge in attention to mental wellness in the workplace, employees often perceive these attempts as purely for show. It remains imperative that leaders do not take a "one size fits all" approach to mental health and actually spend the time and effort necessary to find out what their employees need to improve work-life balance and productivity.

"I think most companies, although this is shifting, are really interested in those easy, check-the-box solutions so that they can say that they're doing something and report to employees that they're doing something," says Leiter. "Full culture change is required, and that takes time. It doesn't necessarily take a lot of resources in terms of financial investment, but it does take a lot of intentionality and that's something that… often requires a senior business leader to be invested in for that really to take hold," says Greenwood.

The fear of burnout is prominent among employees across many industries, which means it should be a key concern for business leaders. If employees are experiencing burnout, it limits their ability to work, which impacts any company's productivity and profitability. If companies do not take more concrete and innovative steps to promote mental health, they will suffer for it. By failing to promote diversity, a sense of belonging, work-life balance and proper training for managers and leadership on how to integrate mental health programs into the foundation of companies, organizations stand to lose productivity and employee retention, which in turn lead to smaller profit margins.

With the aforementioned changes in employees' priorities, driven by the covid-19 pandemic, came the emphasis on better work-life balance. Fortunately, there are many examples of good practices and steps that companies are still able to take—and many benefits in terms of employee productivity, long-term happiness with work and, more broadly, a society-wide improvement in mental health.

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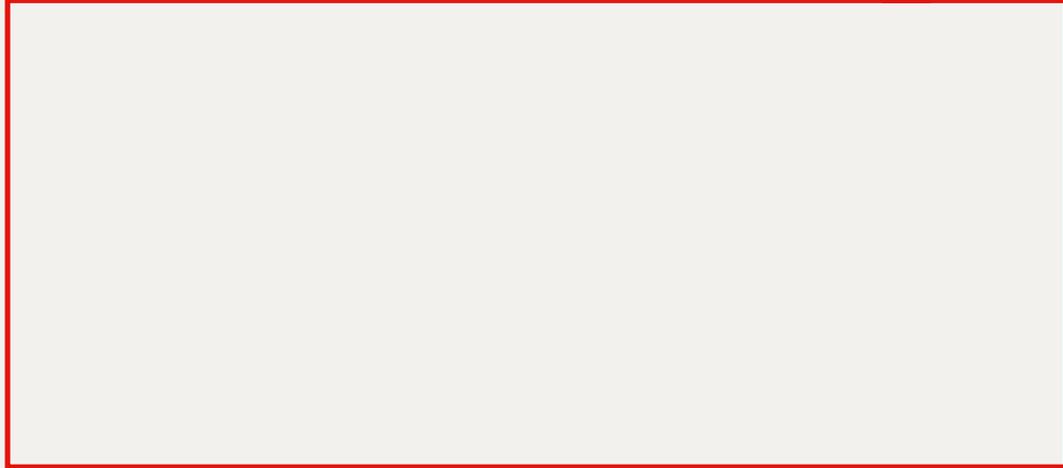
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