



Workplace Wellbeing Census.

A roadmap to workplace recovery.

May 2021.

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Foreword.



Mark Allan
Commercial Director,
Bupa UK Insurance

It's impossible to overstate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on business over the last year. Organisations in all industries have had to adapt and evolve in the face of the crisis, while working against a backdrop of major economic uncertainty. And this has clearly taken its toll, as disappointingly our research suggests that cases of bullying negatively affecting employee wellbeing are now double their levels in 2019 in the nation's workplaces.

As we look towards a period of recovery and regrowth, we should celebrate positive actions that employers have managed to take over the last year. For example, many businesses have seen the benefits of enabling remote working for the long-term, and bringing traditionally in-person services online.

While it's been a gruelling year for all organisations, workplace wellbeing is one important area where the pandemic has fuelled progress. Work plays a crucial part in most people's lives, and not just in providing a source of income. It can give us a sense of purpose and achievement, boost our self-esteem, and provide an opportunity to socialise and build friendships with our colleagues at a time when so many have been isolated. At Bupa, we know that a focus on wellbeing allows businesses and their people to thrive.

Bupa's 2021 *Workplace Wellbeing Census* uncovers a number of 'wellbeing gains' resulting from working through the pandemic. More than 4,000 employees were surveyed across all industries, nations and regions to gain a comprehensive view of the impact that the pandemic has had on the nation's workers. These results have been compared to our last study, conducted at the end of 2019 before the pandemic hit, to provide a benchmark for how businesses have changed over the time and what employees want going forward.

Employees report that they're benefitting from the ability to work from home, a healthier work-life balance and diminishing accessibility issues. And, importantly, businesses are now able to better understand the needs of their employees. Many are improving their wellbeing provision, offering better information and support, or providing access to health services.

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So, our Workplace Wellbeing Census shows that there's a lot for employers to be proud of after the difficulties of the last 12 months, which many will be hoping to carry forward. We know that employees now want to see the wellbeing gains they've enjoyed taken forward for the long-term - believing that they should become part of both wellbeing packages and, indeed, normal working life. And, with a return to normality likely to be a lengthy process, businesses will need to continue managing uncertain and changing workplace dynamics.

By seizing the wellbeing opportunity presented by the pandemic, there are numerous benefits to be found. Firstly, employers can build a happier and more mentally resilient workforce.

And with happier people comes better performance, better staff attraction and retention, fewer sick days, and a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

For many businesses, there is now not just an opportunity for recovery, but for renewal. Employee wellbeing can, and should, be the central tenet of any organisation's COVID-recovery plan - and its culture too. Success in a post-pandemic working world lies with the businesses who take this once-in-a-generation opportunity for change: Progress made now will reap rewards in the future.

Employee wellbeing can, and should, be the central tenet of any organisation's COVID-recovery plan - and its culture too.

Executive Summary

How has the pandemic affected employee wellbeing?

Employee health is vital to every business, and over the last year in particular, many employees have come to expect that their employer cares about their health.

At Bupa we know that a happy, healthy workforce is a positive one: employees who feel that their organisation takes an interest in and prioritises their wellbeing are more likely to be engaged, motivated and loyal.

But the ability to provide wellbeing support has been significantly challenged over the last twelve months. With multiple stay at home orders issued throughout the year, a significant proportion of the workforce have spent little or no time in their physical workplace, without seeing their colleagues face to face.

This has raised a question for conscientious employers:

How do you foster a culture of wellbeing in a team or organisation spread across the country, or even the world?

The impact of workload on mental health has significantly decreased to 27%, down from 36% in 2019



78%
The number of employees reporting good mental health at work has increased from 76% to 78%

46%
Nearly half (46%) claim that wellbeing services have improved

And employers have a greater understanding of mental health (according to 36% of the workforce)

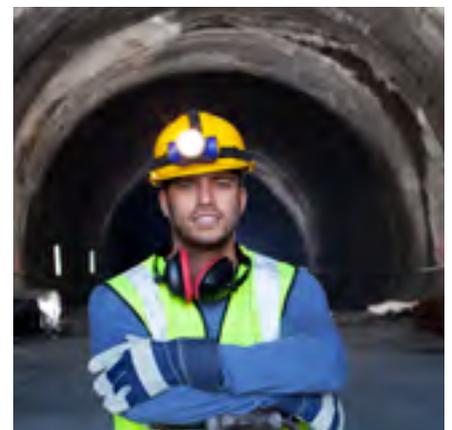


FIG: Wellbeing gains made in 2021.

What does the future of wellbeing look like?

With social distancing measures easing, and plans for a return to some form of “normality” pencilled in for later in 2021, can employers expect to return to pre-pandemic ways of working?

To put it simply, it’s highly unlikely. Employees are looking to take some of the benefits of lockdown, such as the option to work from home, back into post-COVID working life.

Our report shows that organisations have been able to make a number of wellbeing gains over the last year, from inclusivity to better work-life balance, which people will be keen to see remain in place.

Employees are looking to take some of the benefits of lockdown, such as the option to work from home, back into post-COVID working life.

What wellbeing services do employees want from their employers in the next 12 months?

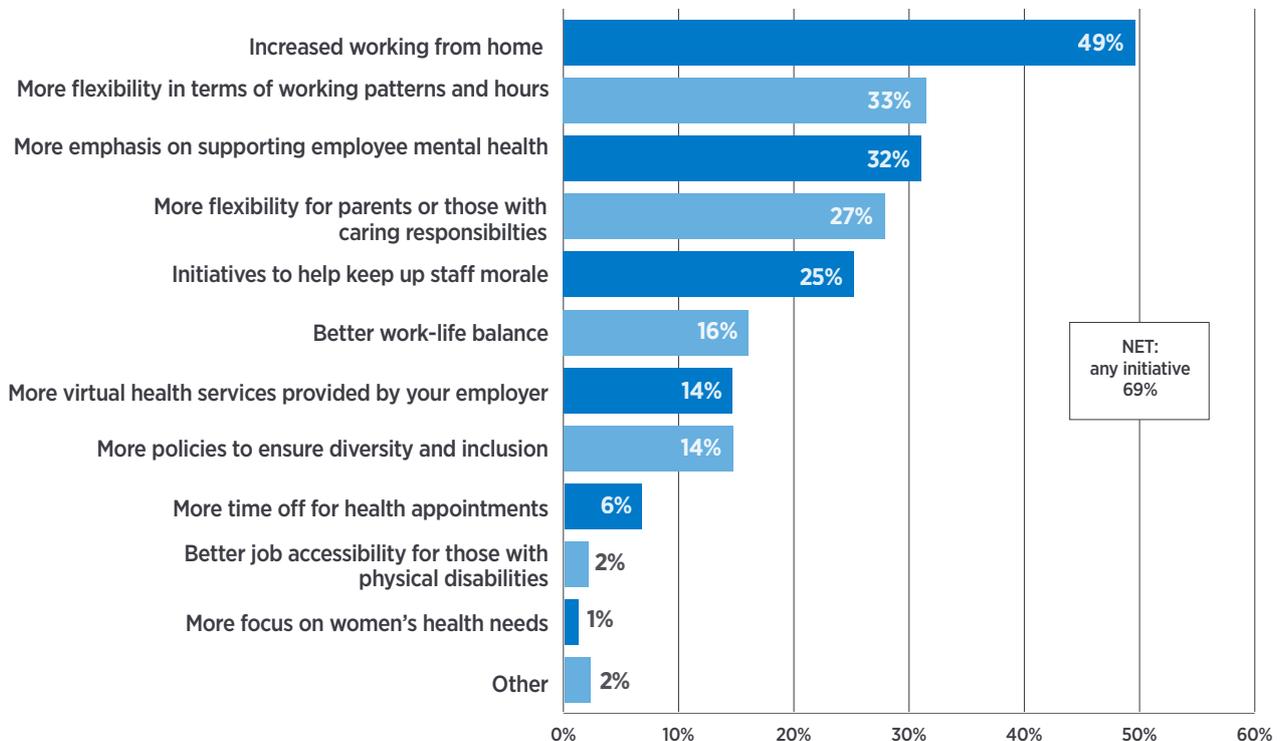


FIG: The wellbeing services employees want from their employers in the next 12 months.

Four wellbeing learnings businesses can take from the pandemic:

1. Favour flexibility

- The majority of us have experienced a change in our working life as a result of the pandemic whether it's the end of our commuting lives, changes to job roles, or the industries in which we work
- Some of these changes are perceived as positive: amongst employees, the availability of remote working, the opportunity not to have to travel to the office, and flexible working patterns are all wellbeing gains that were considered an incentive, offered by some employers pre-pandemic
- But there's still work to be done. For organisations planning their route out of the pandemic, and back to the workplace, making sure the wellbeing gains brought about by COVID-19 remain part of reality will enable more employees to work in a way that makes them feel comfortable and empowered to put as much into their work as possible

2. Put mental health recovery at the top of the agenda

- The mental health impact of the pandemic has been enormous, not just in a work setting, but for individuals suffering from isolation, bereavement or health anxiety. As we transition back into pre-COVID ways of working, we need to keep the mental health of people front of mind
- Where initiatives such as line manager training, teaching resilience and appointing mental health first aiders were making a significant impact on managing mental health in the physical workplace, organisations now need to rethink the way that they manage mental health, to accommodate the new ways of working brought about by the pandemic

3. Accessibility is key

- We've seen a marked increase in the number of health and wellbeing services offered by businesses over the last year, and our study recognises that employees are generally pleased to be offered them, even if they haven't had to use them yet
- Most say that their employer has introduced some form of initiative in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and many hope that these changes will become permanent
- Taking this health-first approach to people management moving forward, and ensuring employees have access to help for both mental and physical health concerns will see employers enjoying greater productivity, reduced turnover and reduced absences, which all makes for a more successful business environment

4. Culture, diversity and inclusion

- Organisations with diverse and inclusive workplaces boast a number of benefits; not only does it make for happier working conditions for employees, it also opens them up to new ideas, innovation, and greater understanding of the world they serve
- We must increasingly put diversity at the top of the agenda. Some ground has been made over the last year, as one in seven employers (14%) has introduced policies to ensure diversity and inclusion in the past 12 months, but there's demand from their people that they keep up with these initiatives moving forward

Introduction and outlook.

Everyone has to care for their mental health as they would their physical wellbeing. As with physical health, it also fluctuates along a spectrum. It can vary from sound mental wellbeing to severe mental health problems.

We know that work can have a huge impact on mental health – in the best cases it can promote wellbeing, but it can also trigger or exacerbate poor mental health. This can include struggling with low mood, stress or anxiety, and common mental health conditions include depression, anxiety, phobias, obsessive-compulsive and bipolar disorders.

Mental health problems affect around one in four people¹ in any given year, and we know that concerns have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Some employees will be fearful about contracting the virus, others will be anxious about family and friends. Some have suffered bereavements during the last year,

often without the chance to say goodbye or attend funerals. There will also be fears about job security, returning to the workplace (including the risks of using public transport for commuting) and financial concerns.

The positive news is that, despite a challenging 12 months for business, a number of wellbeing gains that have emerged from the changing working practices necessitated by the pandemic. Promisingly, 78% of UK employees say they have experienced either fairly good or good mental wellbeing at work during the Coronavirus crisis – this is even slightly up on pre-pandemic levels, where 76% reported the same.

Thinking about a typical working week during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic how would you rate your overall wellbeing?

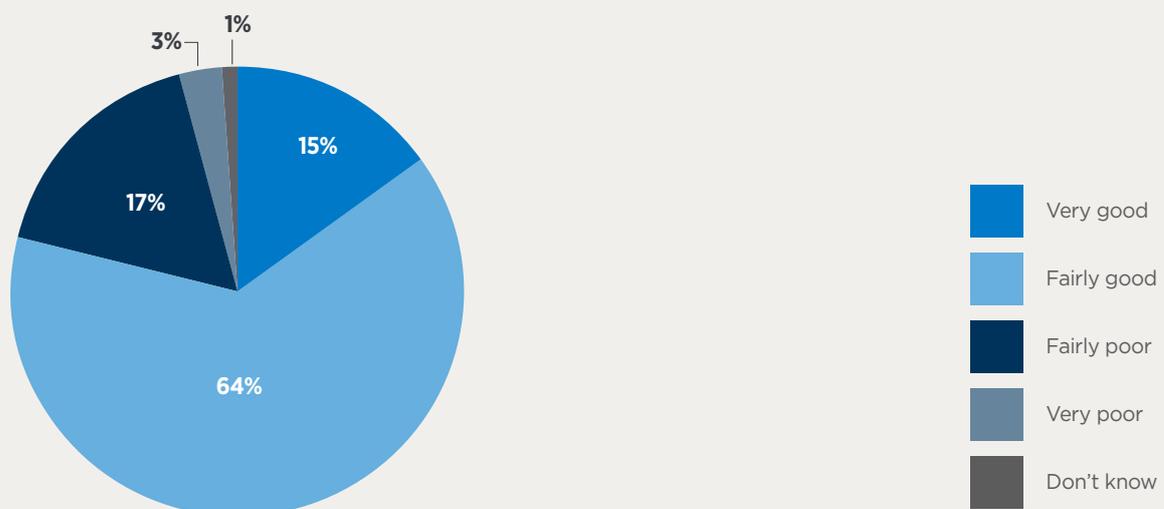


FIG: How employees view their overall wellbeing during the pandemic.

¹McManus, S., Meltzer, H., Brugha, T. S., Bebbington, P. E., & Jenkins, R. (2009). Adult psychiatric morbidity in England, 2007: results of a household survey.



Similarly, older employees are more likely than younger employees to be ambivalent towards changes in working trends, refraining from judging pandemic-induced shifts as either positive or negative. The availability of flexible working and working from home was particularly well received by younger employees; of those aged 25 to 34, 40% say that working from home has been a positive change, and 26% say the same about flexible working.



Tom Hoosen-Webber,
People Director,
Bupa UK Insurance

One of the biggest shifts for many workers has been the closure of offices and the requirement to work from home. Approximately two-fifths of employees (39%) have been working entirely from home since March 2020, with a further 13% working from home for most of this time. And, while this has posed challenges, including social isolation and the blurring of boundaries between work and home, many have reported a positive effect on their wellbeing. 73% of respondents to our survey believe that working from home provides better flexibility for their lifestyle.

Indeed, more formal flexibility, including shorter, compressed days, job sharing – or just making work ‘asynchronous’ – has been a necessity for many, particularly home-schooling parents. Leading on from this, two-fifths (37%) of employees found the reduction in commuting time a positive change.

Women are more likely to have found changes to working practices positive, while men are more likely to say that they simply did not have any impact on their wellbeing. In particular, women are more likely than men to have benefited from the availability of working from home (33% vs 26%) and flexible working (22% vs 16%).

The demands of the workforce have changed as a result of the pandemic. Younger employees in particular expect greater flexibility from their organisation as a result of their experience over the last year. Employers that are keen to attract top talent need to be aware of what’s most important to their new cohort of employees and offer the working practices they value if they want to remain competitive.”

Which factors have impacted positively and negatively on employees' wellbeing over the past 12 months?

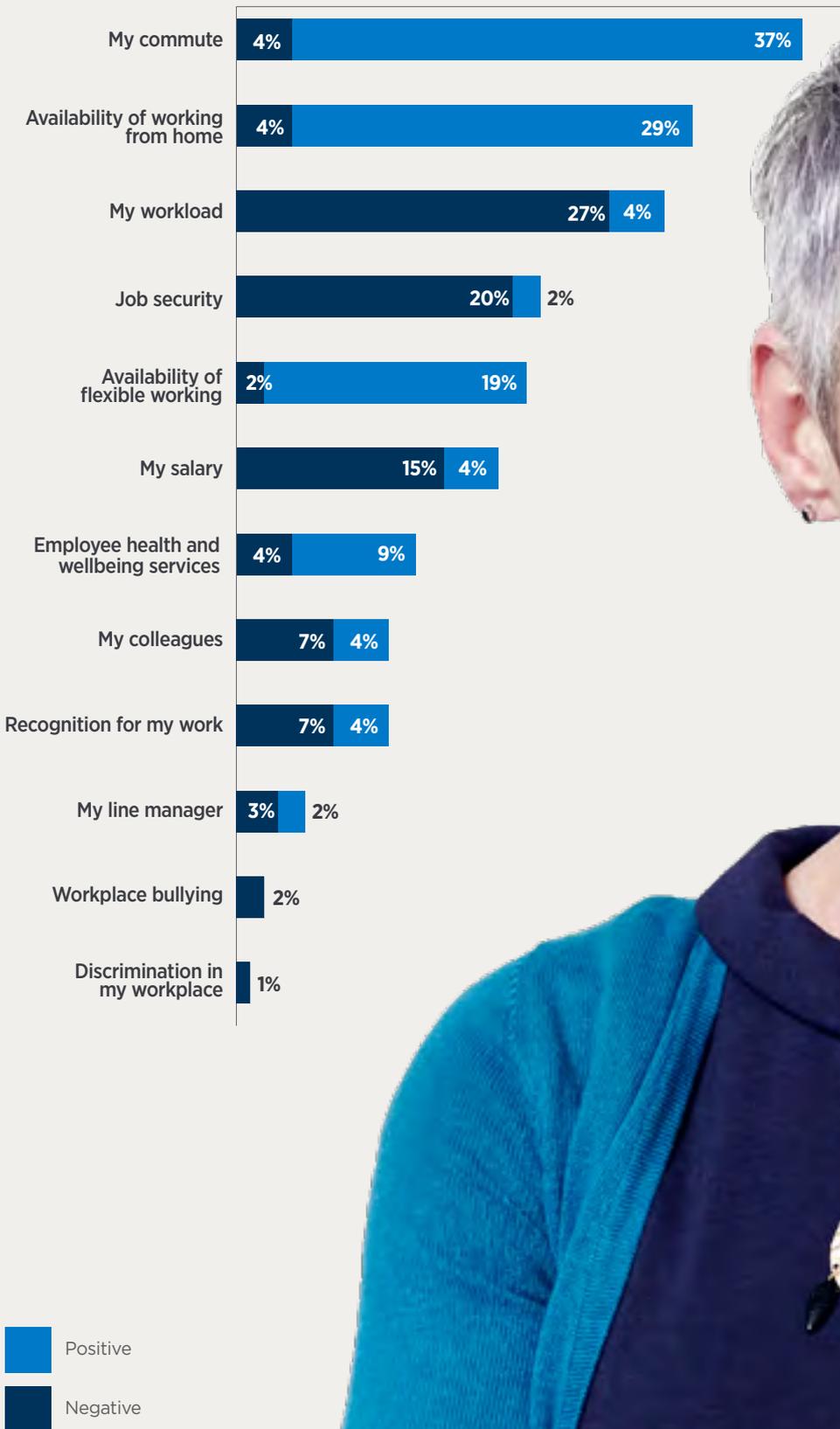


FIG: The factors which have impacted positively and negatively on employees' wellbeing over the past 12 months.

What’s more, some core pillars of office life that we might expect to have diminished simply haven’t. This is perhaps down to the great work many businesses have done when it comes to implementing communication technology and strategies – ensuring that teams are still able to collaborate, even when physically apart.

But gaps remain: While 78% of workers reported that their overall wellbeing has been “good” during the pandemic, 61% believe the crisis has had an overall negative impact on their wellbeing – with the youngest workers being the most likely to report that their wellbeing has been negatively impacted by COVID-19. So we must acknowledge that there is still some work to be done for businesses to ensure employee wellbeing. This is particularly important in working environments, which are likely to change and are unpredictable.



What impact has the pandemic had on employee’s wellbeing?

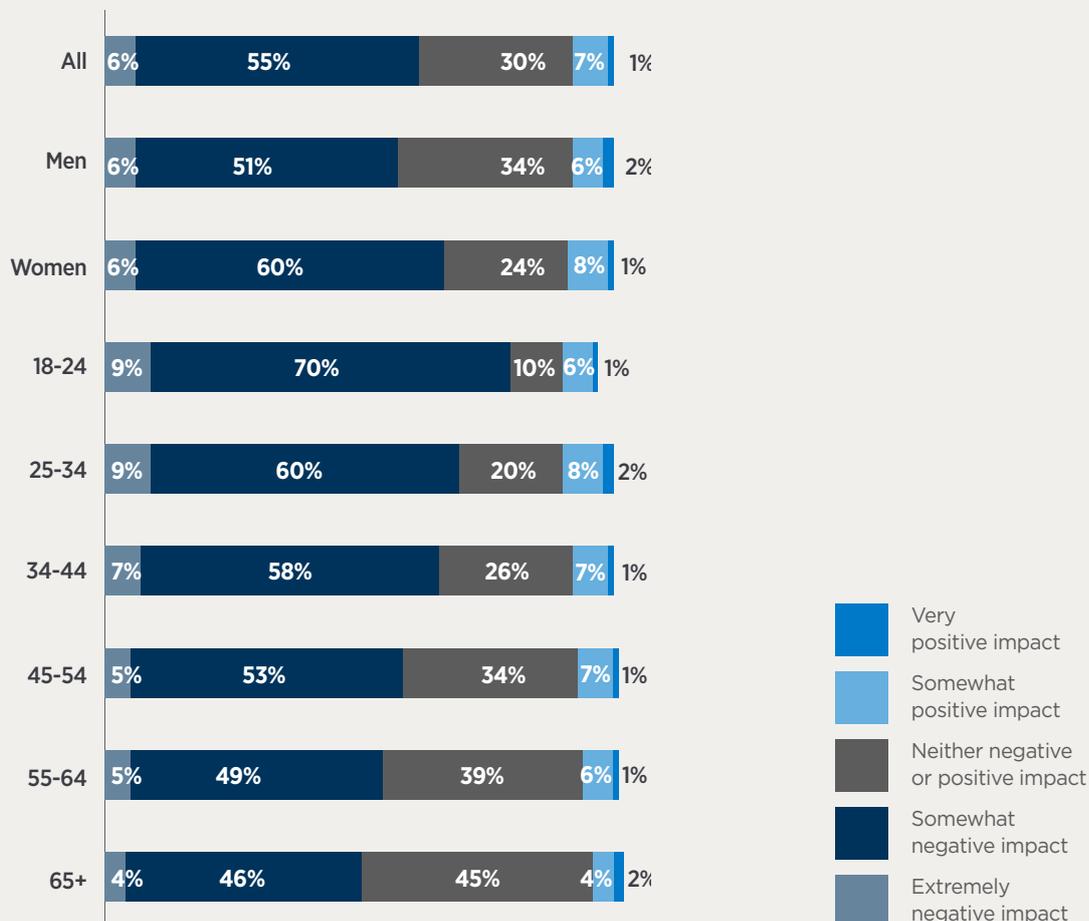


FIG: Whether the pandemic has had a positive or negative impact on wellbeing. Introduction and outlook.



**Dr Luke James,
Medical Director,
Bupa UK Insurance**

During the pandemic many employers have put initiatives into place to address mental health conditions, from offering more comprehensive health insurance to flexible working to social and collaborative activities to improve morale. And, encouragingly, many of them are already seeing the benefits of doing so: they have proven their commitment to supporting employee wellbeing and as a result are beginning to see happier, more settled, healthier and more productive workers.

The question for employers is now what they do next. How do they take the wellbeing gains that have been won during the pandemic, and address issues and challenges employees have faced, for the long term? How do they fulfil their duty of care to staff, while simultaneously reaping the benefits of better productivity, which comes alongside better wellbeing?"

**Section one:
Creating a
workspace
of the future**



The Census findings help us provide a clear roadmap for businesses for the year ahead. We're able to learn from how employees have both benefited and lost out as a result of changing working practices, and determine what they now need from their employers.

We can also better understand how employees have been affected by the stresses and strains of the last twelve months, and, as a result, the wellbeing services and working practices they now require.

Working from home

It's clear that many employees in the country have settled into the rhythms of mandatory remote working, as directed by the government. And now, as companies try to decide the best way forward for their employees, it is evident that some don't want to push the genie entirely back into the bottle. Indeed, our research shows that 23% of workers would like a mixture of home and office working in the future - capitalising on the benefits of both environments.

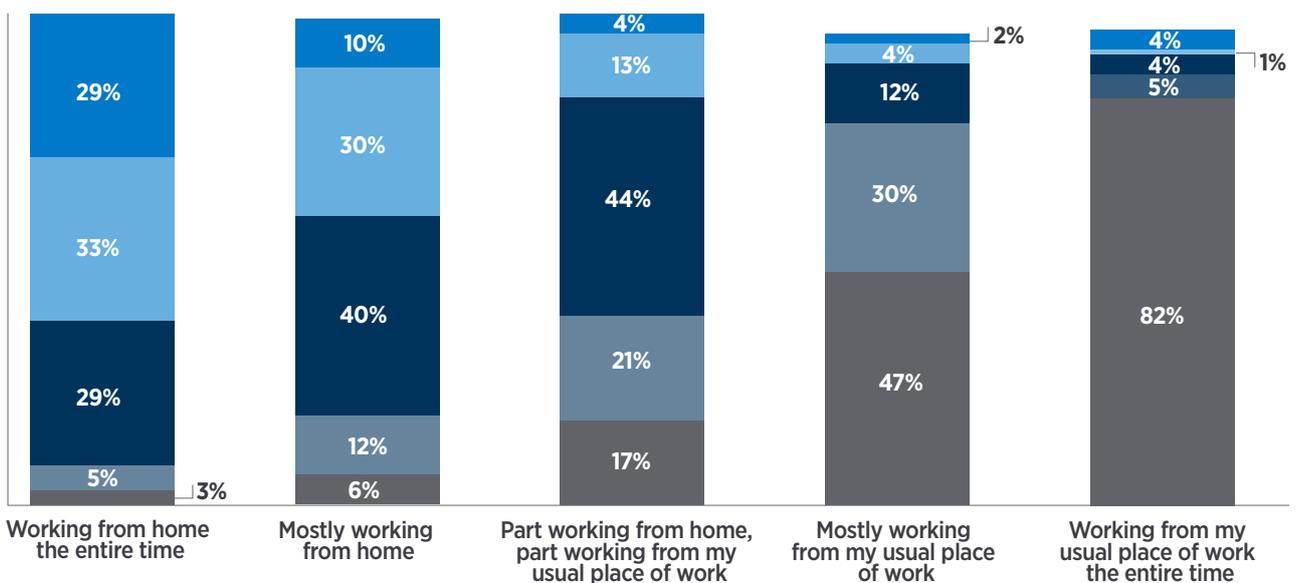
There is a marked gender split here, with women more likely to want to work from home after the pandemic than men. Seven out of ten (70%) women want to work from home at least partly compared to 63% of men.



Dr. Luke James

Employees want the best of both worlds: structure and sociability on one hand, and independence and flexibility on the other.”

Current working status



Preferred working status



FIG: Preferred working status after the pandemic.

Younger respondents are also more likely to have a preference for home working with nearly four-fifths (79%) of those aged 25 to 34 wanting to work from home after the pandemic is over; in contrast, half (50%) of those aged 65 and above want to work in their usual place of work full-time.

And it does not appear that a preference for home-working is driven by childcare needs: those with no children are just as likely as those with a child under 18 to want to work from home after the pandemic (74% vs 71%). In the short term, companies are managing this demand in varied ways. Some have given employees permission to continue working remotely even as businesses reopen. Some are looking to recall to the workplace in staggered groups. Others are planning to leave it entirely up to individual workers to decide where to base themselves.

But businesses are also starting to think about the longer term, including alternative

ways to structure work communication and hours as well as physical presence. And what many are converging on amid the ongoing uncertainty is different models of hybrid working.

Of course, hybrid working patterns won't suit everyone, and aren't available to every sector. The pandemic has also drawn attention to disparities among those allowed to work remotely, including the varying quality of internet access, the demands of parenting and caring, and the luxury of roomy homes and outdoor space that make working from home comfortable. There's also the question of personality. People who appreciate a fixed routine, for example, may find it difficult to go back and forth between work settings.

So, for businesses to thrive, they'll need to look at the needs of both their workforce generally and to individual members within it – being as flexible and adaptable as they're currently expecting their employees to be.



Rachel Murray,
Head of Employee Health and Wellbeing, Bupa UK Insurance

Most simply, hybrid working tends to include more choice around when to work as well as where. It generally helps employees to fit work around the rest of their lives, rather than structuring other parts of a weekday around hours logged in an office. Ideally, it's the best of both worlds: structure and sociability on one hand, and independence and flexibility on the other.”

Diversity and inclusion

Our Census shows positive movement in diversity and inclusion areas over the last 12 months, with nearly half (46%) of employees believing that gender discrimination has become less prevalent, and 56% reporting that there is less sexual orientation discrimination this year.

For the vast majority (68%) of workers who have a disability, working from home removed some of the accessibility issues they face when going to a physical workplace. Over the past 12 months, one in seven employers (14%) have introduced policies to ensure diversity and inclusion. Employees are very positive about these; the vast majority hope their employer continues the initiatives (81%).

But there's still ground to make up here. More than a quarter of employees (28%) have personally experienced discrimination at work. This rises to 35% of women and 40% of disabled employees. There are also some specific areas where discrimination is still on the increase - 22% of workers claim that age discrimination has worsened over the last year. And a similar number (18%) have seen an increase in gender reassignment discrimination.

Which types of discrimination have affected employees' wellbeing?

22% of workers claim that **age discrimination** has worsened over the last year

18% of workers have seen an increase in **gender reassignment discrimination**



FIG: Which types of discrimination have affected employees' wellbeing.



**Mark Allan,
Commercial Director,
Bupa UK Insurance**

It's a no-brainer that diversity makes for a stronger workforce. When companies embrace and value employees of different backgrounds into an inclusive workplace, they reap the rewards in creativity and innovation, a strong company culture, improved employee performance, and more. But it's important to remember that diversity isn't the same as inclusivity. The savviest businesses are viewing inclusivity as a next step in successfully supporting a diverse workforce.

It's all about creating an environment that welcomes and includes each employee."



In terms of strategies to boost inclusivity, one of the most important routes to success is in achieving buy-in from the top. Mark Allen also notes: **"Prioritising inclusivity at any organisation will be naturally a challenge if the C-suite doesn't prioritise it as well."**

Indeed, the most successful organisations are also writing inclusivity into their core business values – many of which have been revisited recently, as is often the case in times of significant change.

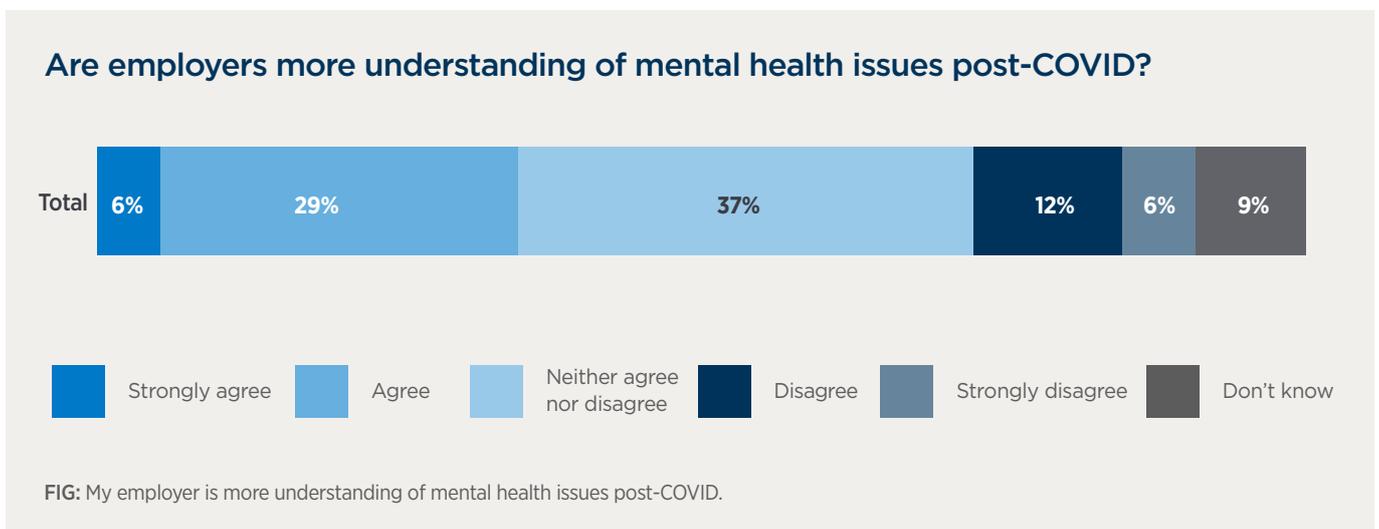
And even while operating remotely, the most inclusive businesses encourage a culture of frequent check-ins – opening a dialogue that allows employees to honestly express their needs – or discuss challenges they may experience in the workplace (particularly those of a sensitive nature).

Many companies have already done a good job promoting non-binary and gender inclusion by providing gender-neutral bathrooms. But this needs to extend to the remote space as well. Organisations can create digital 'safe spaces' by encouraging employees to add pronouns to their email signatures and usernames, or by inviting employees to reserve time for prayer and other personal needs by blocking it out on the calendar to ensure every employee feels comfortable bringing their full self to work.

Building a culture of understanding

Many organisations are responding to mental health challenges through prioritising empathy and understanding, which is really encouraging to see. Some leading organisations, including *Amazon* and *Google*, have even appointed Chief Empathy Officers, to promote a culture of understanding from the top-down.

Promisingly, this is an area which has improved since the pandemic, with many employers appreciating the stresses and strains of living and working in an uncertain and often worrying time. As a result, 36% of workers believe that their employer is more understanding of mental health issues post-COVID than they were before the outbreak.



When it comes to understanding and empathy, we see some notable differences between industry sectors, with financial services industries leading the way (54% of employees in these fields believe their employers are now showing more empathy). At the other end of the scale, just a quarter (26%) of employees in manufacturing believe the same.

54%

of employees in the financial services industries believe their employers are now showing more empathy.



A photograph of a man and a young child looking at a document together. The man, on the right, has short dark hair and is wearing a plaid shirt. The child, on the left, has light brown hair and is wearing a blue and white striped shirt. They are both looking down at a white sheet of paper. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a window or a bright indoor setting.

Section two: Tackling the wellbeing challenges

Although the majority of employees in the Census report that their overall wellbeing has been good, the pandemic has still had a broadly negative impact on employee wellbeing nationwide. For most, this has only been a somewhat negative impact (55%) but a substantial minority (6%) report an extremely negative impact.

Looking at the sectors most affected, those in industries hit hardest by the pandemic, such as hospitality and leisure, report relatively low negative effects of COVID-19 on their wellbeing. This may be as a result of reduced working hours, or furlough schemes, which have been prominent in the industry, where businesses that have continued to operate over the last year have had to adjust to new ways of working, changes to remit, and possible longer working hours.

Again, there are significant demographic differences, with women more likely to report a negative impact than men. Two-thirds (66%) of female employees say the impact has been negative compared to 57% of men; however, 6% of both men and women report an extremely negative impact on their overall wellbeing.

Almost four-fifths (79%) of 18 to 24s experienced a negative impact on their overall wellbeing, as did 69% of 25 to 34s. Far fewer older employees experienced the same: Only 50% of those aged 65 and above and 54% of those aged 55 to 64. These respondents are more likely to report that the pandemic had neither a positive or negative impact.

The pandemic has also had a particularly severe impact on those living with a disability. This group is twice as likely as those without a disability to report an extremely negative impact of the pandemic (12% vs 6%).

The pandemic has also had a particularly severe impact on those living with a disability.

What sectors have employees' wellbeing been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?

- 18%** Hospitality and leisure
- 22%** IT and telecoms
- 23%** Real estate
- 25%** Manufacturing
- 26%** Construction
- 27%** Financial services
- 28%** Retail
- 29%** Transportation and distribution
- 30%** Legal
- 30%** Medical and health services
- 31%** Education
- 32%** Media/marketing/advertising/PR and sales
- 33%** Accountancy

FIG: sectors where employees' wellbeing are most negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.



Blurred boundaries

When looking at the challenges to wellbeing, a natural place to start is by considering the digital technology that has kept us connected and working during the pandemic. We know that these devices are so invaluable that most employers now provide their people with a phone to stay connected to colleagues, but many have wondered whether there's a downside of connectivity as it can tether us to work 24/7.

Working without boundaries can create considerable challenges for work-life balance, especially for employees who are grappling with tricky personal circumstances, or for segmentors (people who like to keep a sharp line between work and home). Blurred lines between work and home life affected more than a quarter (26%) of employees, with longer working hours also proving challenging for 17%.

There are, of course, numerous routes to tackling this challenge. Some employers have attempted to assist work-life balance by restricting access to work systems outside of office hours, fueled by an understandable concern that people are working too much and not getting the rest they need to function effectively.



Tom Hoosen-Webber,
People Director,
Bupa UK Insurance

For some, encouraging open and candid discussions is the most effective route to tackling the blurred boundaries between work and home. Many managers are encouraging more honest and candid discussions with employees about their work-life balance, and how the two can work well together to enable each employee to be at their best.”



Workload

Workloads have had the greatest negative impact on employee wellbeing, with 27% of employees reporting this negatively impacted their mental health during the pandemic. However, this is a marked improvement on 2019, when 36% of employees cited the same.

Of course, with significant furloughs and closures in these industries, employees may have a range of other concerns, particularly relating to job security. Away from the physical office, less than one in 20 (4%) of employees said recognition for their work has had a positive impact on their wellbeing over the last year, while a similarly low number (4%) believed their salary had had a positive effect.

Workplace bullying

Worryingly, reports of workplace bullying negatively affecting wellbeing over the past three years have increased since 2019, up from 14% to 26% this year.

There are, of course, many reasons that workplace bullying might occur. For example, role ambiguity can occur in areas where organisations have had to adapt quickly and change priorities as a result of the pandemic. These changes may lead to a lack of clear processes being implemented, and employees being unclear as to how their work fits in the new work environment.

A change in work levels can also impact employees' expectations and feelings of security in the workplace. Both an increase and decrease in work levels can leave employees feeling targeted. For example, employees working from home may work longer hours as a result of losing their daily commute to the workplace. We've seen this in some of the most under-pressure sectors, with those working in education, and transport and logistics most likely to report cases of bullying.

27%

of employees reported workloads negatively impacted their mental health during the pandemic.



4%

of employees said recognition for their work has had a positive impact on their wellbeing over the last year.



This can lead to deadlines becoming more urgent, and increased expectations that these deadlines will be met.

In addition, employees face the uncertainty of who to turn to with issues outside of the physical workplace. When faced with personal issues or health concerns, individuals may struggle to know who to speak to. This can allow cases of bullying to fly under the radar as, despite the increase in the number of cases of bullying reported over the last year, colleagues report that bullying has improved over the last year overall.

Working from home can also heighten the capacity for employees to feel isolated and excluded. This can occur both intentionally and unintentionally; for example, team members may not be invited to certain meetings over Teams or Zoom, or be included in certain 'group' instant messages. Although these occurrences may be unintentional, they can lead to employees feeling marginalised and excluded.

Job security

A much greater concern for employees to address is that of worries around job security. As furlough schemes and redundancies have hit the headlines, it's no surprise that many businesses in many industries have been negatively affected by the pandemic.

In 2019 more than three in ten (31%) employees believed job security had a positive impact on their wellbeing: This figure dropped to just 2% in 2020. This suggests that job insecurity is on the increase and, certainty around employment status, is no longer as widely enjoyed.

Job insecurity and financial concerns can also have potentially adverse consequences on employee mental health. To tackle these feelings, it may be particularly important for employers to be mindful of the stress that uncertainty causes, as well as (where possible) instilling hope or agency in employees.



Presenteeism

While there are numerous issues affecting the mental health of employees, we are not seeing a correlation with sick leave. Indeed, 72% of the workforce didn't take a sick day in 2020, with those in hospitality significantly less likely to take sick leave - perhaps due to greater instability in the sector, which has been among the hardest hit over the last year.

What percentage of employees did not take a sick day last year by industry?

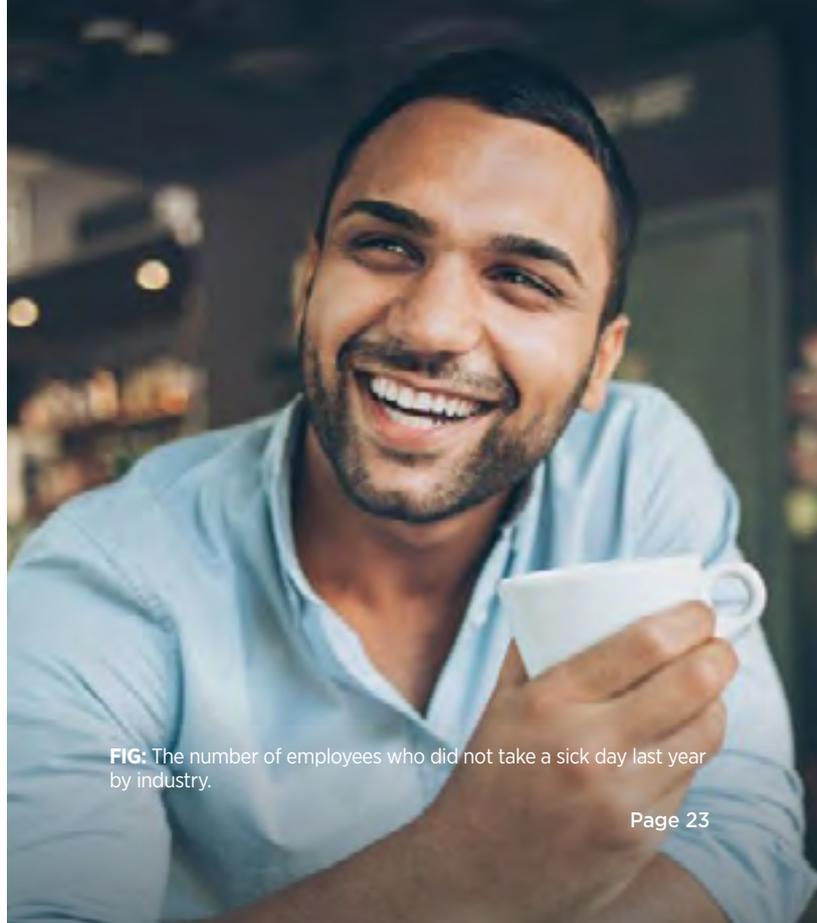
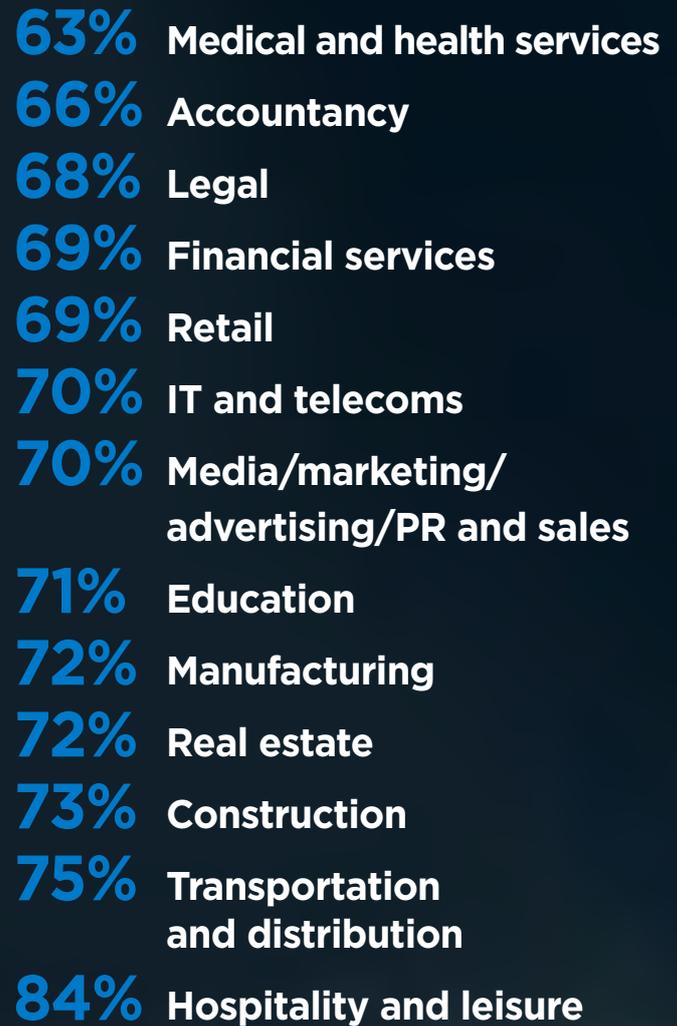


FIG: The number of employees who did not take a sick day last year by industry.

But the question is whether presenteeism (or working while sick), which can cause productivity loss, poor health and exhaustion, is at play here. Presenteeism may have many motives; for example, an employee may work while sick because they simply need the money, and cannot afford to take time off due to illness. Other reasons include feeling that their career prospects may be damaged if they take time off, blurred lines between home and work, and an expectation of presence driven by management.

Different employers will have different sick leave policies, but the business case is simple: Having a workforce that's healthy, engaged and motivated helps businesses to thrive.

“ Louise Aston, Wellbeing Director, Business in The Community
Presenteeism has an adverse impact on employee wellbeing, engagement and productivity.

Employees should be trusted and judged on their outputs, not on how many hours they are visible.

With a global pandemic causing a major recession and job insecurity, it's not surprising that absences for sickness are lower than they were in 2019.

However, we know that people get sick, and it's important that they are encouraged to take the time off they need to recover. The increasing dependence on remote and hybrid workforces provides employers with a once in a lifetime opportunity to adopt new ways of working that enhance wellbeing for everyone.”

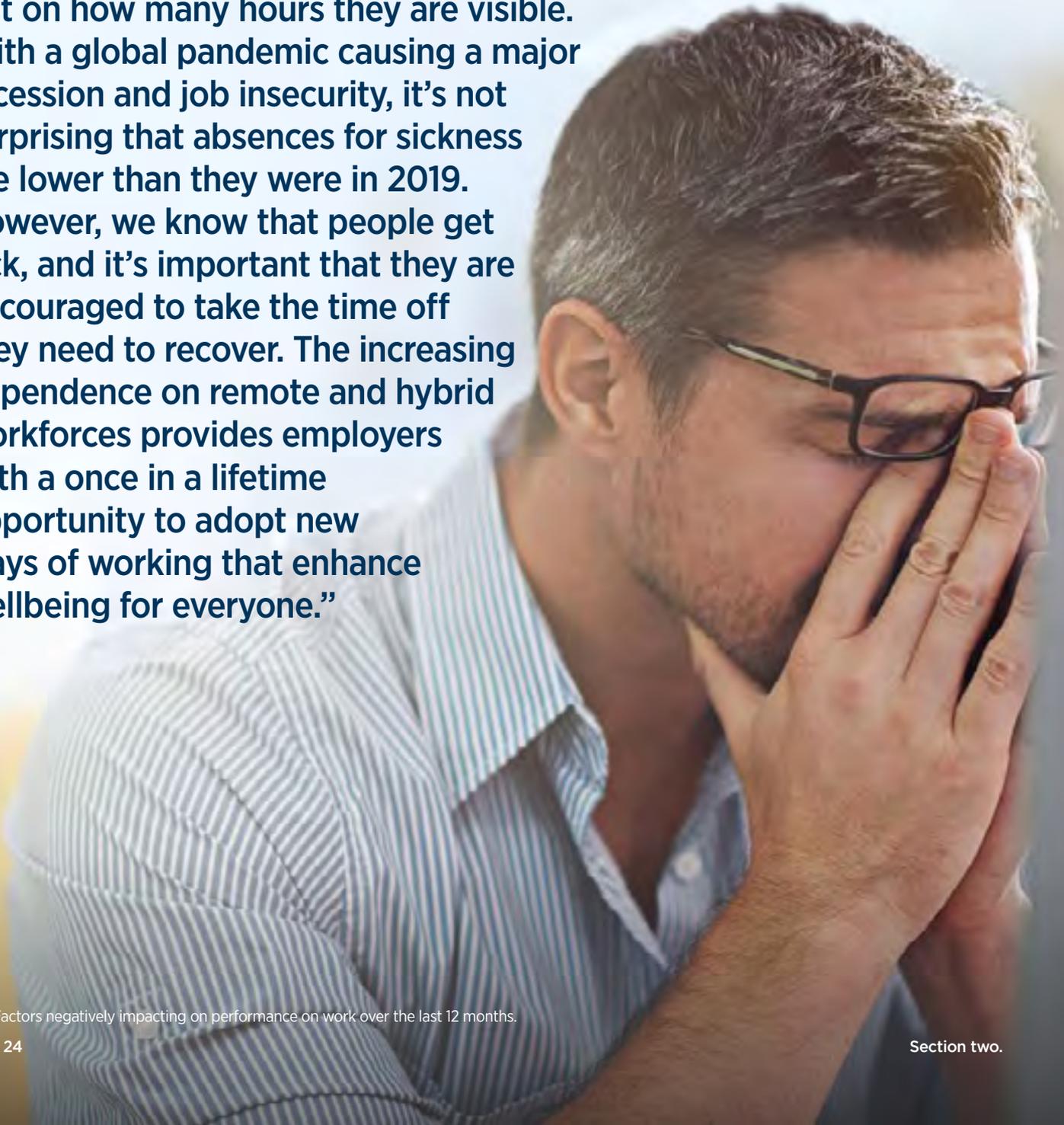


FIG: Factors negatively impacting on performance on work over the last 12 months.

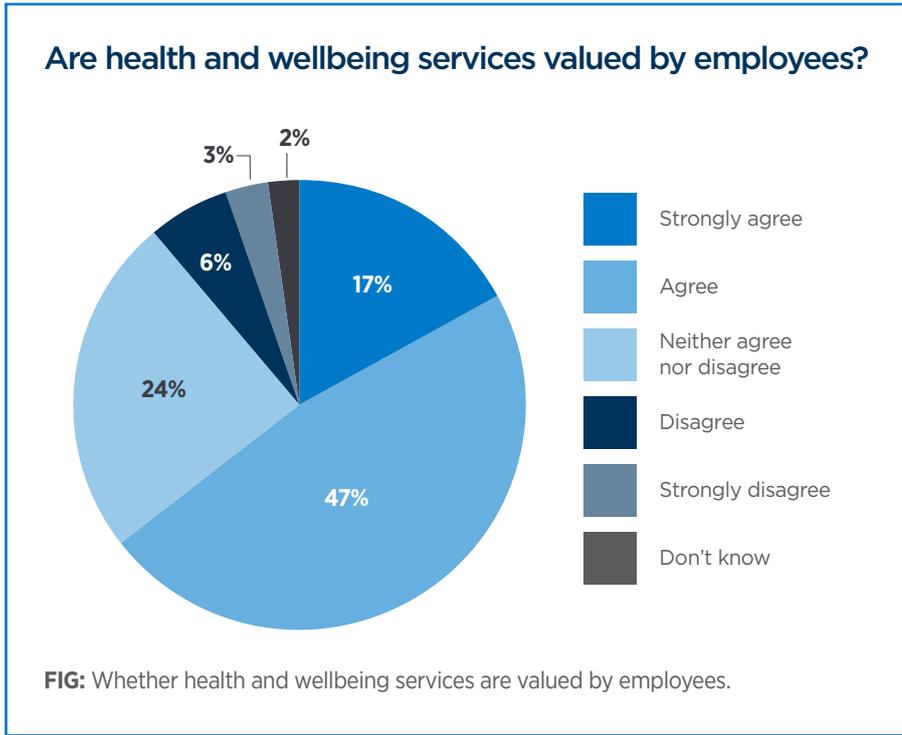
Section three: The provision of wellbeing services



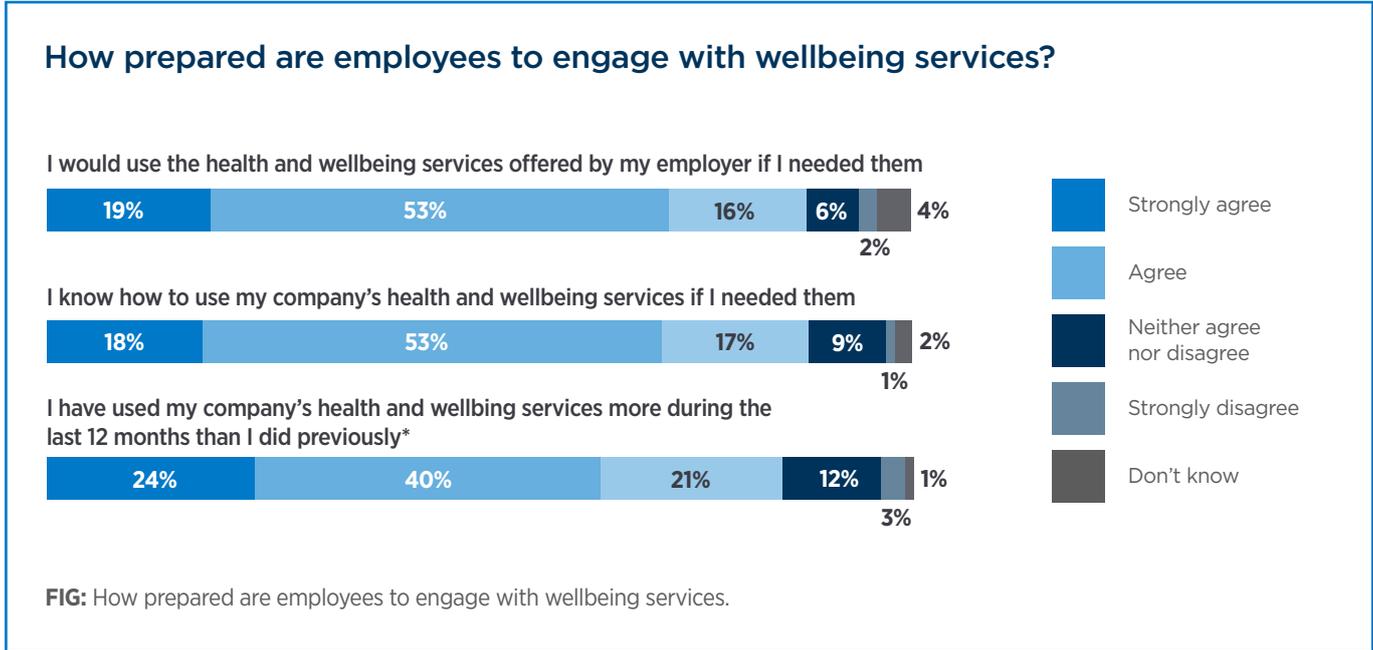
Wellbeing benefits are no longer considered a ‘nice to have’ but rather a necessity for a successful business. Employers that offer packages that help employees grow their careers, obtain a healthy work-life balance and work more productively are now increasingly well recognised. Positively, nearly half (46%) of employees feel that the wellbeing services on offer from their workplace have improved over the last 12 months. However, despite clear progress, there is still work to be done.

More than six in 10 employees value the wellbeing services offered by their employer. However, 73% of workers would like to see further additions to their employers’ wellbeing policies including better work-life balance (41%), initiatives to keep up staff morale (40%) and more flexibility in terms of working patterns and hours (38%).

**More than
6 in 10
employees value
the wellbeing
services offered
by their employer.**



Promisingly, employees say that, if needed, they know how to use the health and wellbeing services offered by their employers. Nearly two-thirds (63%) say they’ve used the services on offer more during the last 12 months than they did previously, suggesting that pressures around the pandemic has spurred increased uptake.



There are a number of specific ‘asks’ that employees have for the year ahead, including more time off for medical appointments or access to virtual health services. Interestingly, the prospect of better wellbeing services from their employer are significantly more valuable to women than men (69% vs 61%).



Facilitating medical care

Positively, the majority of employees (65%) say that it is easy for them to take time off work for a medical appointment, but a significant number (27%) have still avoided or delayed seeking medical help due to work commitments. And even for those who can readily take time off, appointment availability can still act as a barrier to treatment times: Just a quarter (24%) say that it is easy for them to get a doctor’s appointment.

How do employees feel about medical assistance during working hours?

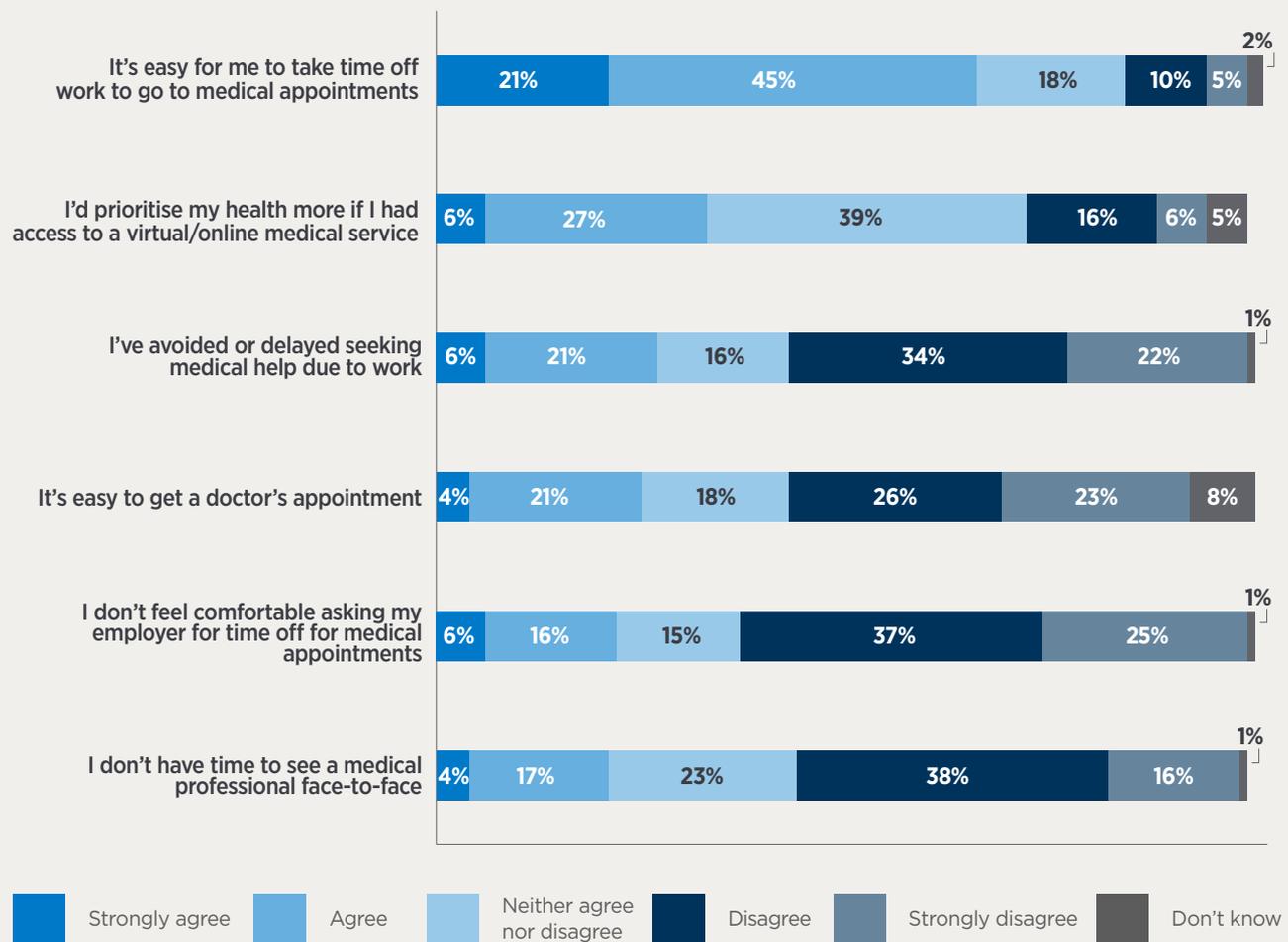


FIG: Agreement with regard to medical assistance.



Younger employees are the most likely to struggle with taking time off work for medical care – only 57% of those aged 18 to 24 say it is easy for them to take time off work

for appointments, compared to 70% of those aged 65+. Younger employees are also more likely to delay their healthcare, with 31% of those aged 25 to 35 saying they have delayed seeking medical help to work. This age group are also the most likely to say they do not feel comfortable asking their employer for time off for medical appointments (26%).

Given these barriers to taking time off work for medical appointments, it follows that younger employees are also the most open to online and virtual services which may be more accessible than in-person appointments. Overall, a third of employees (33%) say they would prioritise their health more if they had access to virtual medical services and this rises to almost half (47%) of those aged 25 to 34.

Encouraging open dialogue

For some business owners and employees, mental health seems like a personal concern, and, as such, one that shouldn't be discussed at work.

But opening up workplace culture to encourage discussions about mental health is crucial to tackling the underlying issues. The key is to lead by example and give employees plenty of opportunities to ease into discussions that were once considered taboo. This can create a much more accepting environment in which mental health is given more consideration.

Of course, changing company culture starts as a top-down issue, beginning with changes that management puts into action, but the lion's share of the work depends on employees. It's management's job to steer



**Alison Unsted, Deputy CEO,
The City Mental Health Alliance**

It's crucial that organisations demonstrate commitment to action from senior leadership by nominating a mental health and wellbeing lead at Board or senior leadership level, to drive sustainable change and influence healthy business culture. And a big part of leading this change is by encouraging an open dialogue. This can start with leaders being more open about how they are feeling and how they look after their own wellbeing, which we have increasingly seen during the pandemic. This signals that this business has an open culture and cares about mental health."

their workforce in the right direction, but how employees react is what lets them meet, exceed, or fall short of management's goals.

It isn't hard to see why: If discussing mental health challenges leads to awkwardness or judgement from peers, then that nudges the workplace towards a culture where mental health isn't treated as seriously as it should be. By encouraging employees to be empathetic and listen, organisations can make sure the workplace is always moving in a positive direction.

Better communication

Of course, wellbeing programmes are only effective if employees are engaging with them, and are open to using the services on offer. Surveys on needs and interests, interviews and focus groups are good ways to understand what is important to employees. They can also gain insight into what might motivate employees to make changes for a healthier lifestyle.

Communication is key to successful employee engagement.

**Mark Allan, Commercial Director,
Bupa UK Insurance**



We're all on a journey to recovery, and while employers are doing the best they can, knowing the right course of action for your people can be tricky. Even the most comprehensive wellbeing programmes can only be impactful if employees know about them. The most successful firms are those who talk to employees on their own terms, in the way they want, – and then capture feedback on programs, including satisfaction and suggestions for improvement.”

One of the best ways to ensure employees engage with wellbeing programmes is open dialogue between employer and employee. But this is further complicated by self-stigma surrounding mental health problems at work, where employees are embarrassed or uncertain about opening up to their colleagues or bosses. Self-stigma encourages individuals to hide their symptoms, often worsening their condition and contributing to the lack of understanding on the subject.

Education

It's a positive sign that workers report being more aware of their mental and physical health than ever (55% say this is the case.)

However, experience of mental illness can differ widely, making it hard to spot. Symptoms can range from physical (such as fatigue or headaches), psychological (such as anxiety and sadness), behavioural (such as increased alcohol consumption and restlessness) and changed attendance patterns (such as lateness and working long hours).

Employees may benefit from information and guidance on how to spot early warning signs, together with the freedom to talk about them and to seek help if needed.



Section four: Change for the long term

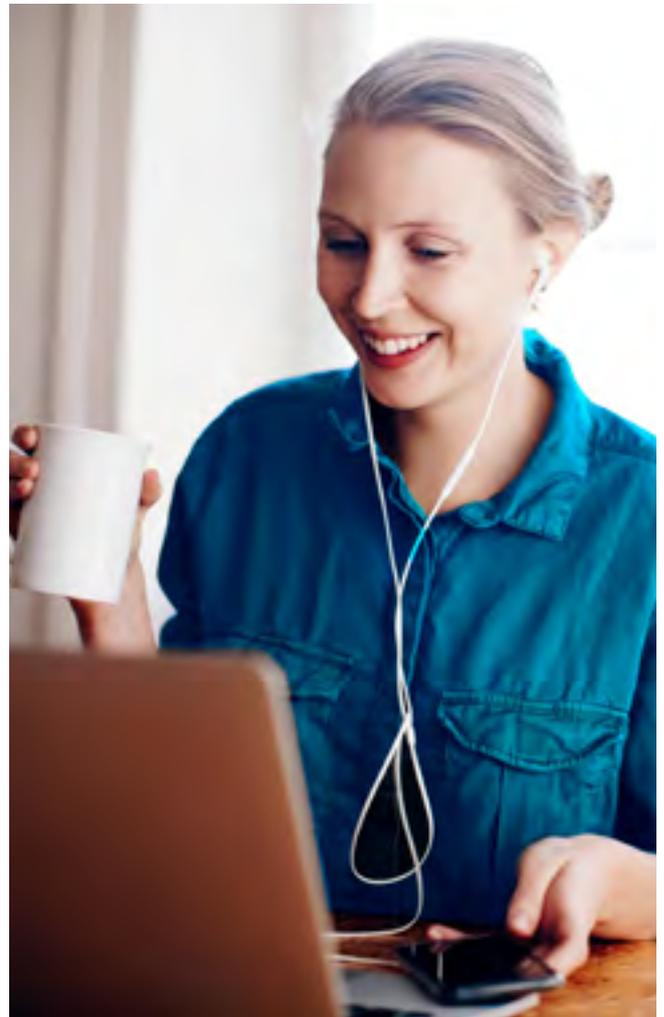


The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed what we mean by being ‘at work’. As employers around the world grapple with what work should look like in the aftermath of the pandemic, it seems likely that a significant number of people will continue to work at least in part from home as part of a flexible, hybrid model.

Many companies have established that remote working can work for the longer term, and that productivity can remain high in even the most challenging circumstances. Despite this, with a new operational agility comes a different set of risks to employee wellbeing. The new burnout is driven by fear of job losses; an inevitable blurring of work/life balance; isolation; workplace suitability and adequate and reliable technology.

Concerns around the economy, particularly for the hardest-hit sectors, can result in employees working longer hours to establish themselves as indispensable or improve their future prospects. Fatigue and stress, combined with wider societal anxieties around the pandemic and the lack of a clear endpoint, have resulted in employee wellbeing issues, and will pose a once-in a-generation challenge for business leaders.

Companies should be praised for their successful and rapid transition into crisis mode, which has provided vital reassurance for their workforce. The impact of this initial reassurance is clear from this study: employees feel supported and wellbeing programmes are improving. However, businesses now need to look ahead. While providing long-term clarity is a tall order, mitigating risk and benefitting from opportunities starts with communicating protocols in place for fast reaction.



Adopting a radical employee-focused approach will facilitate the employee experience.



Rachel Murray,
Head of Employee Health and Wellbeing,
Bupa UK Insurance

There will be no return to the ‘old normal’. Organisations and managers do not have the answers to the uncertainty of the future ways of working, but in order to maintain the initial levels of positivity from employees, employers must continue to engage and communicate with empathy.

Leadership development models must focus on care, human connection and resilience. Otherwise the fallout of a stressed workforce, working under uncertain conditions with no end in sight, means burnout could become another epidemic of sorts, affecting both employers and society.”

As well as an accelerated, proactive listening strategy to understand and manage stress in this fluid situation, a productive digital experience will help the workforce cope with prolonged remote working, with provisions to ensure workforce interaction and ward off isolation. HR functions must also look to evolve by adopting a radical employee-focused approach to facilitating the employee experience.

Resources

[1] McManus, S., Meltzer, H., Brugha, T. S., Bebbington, P. E., & Jenkins, R. (2009). Adult psychiatric morbidity in England, 2007: results of a household survey.

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