



# Opening the Conversation: Mental Wellbeing in Market Research



## FOREWORDS

Looking after our emotional – as well as our physical – wellbeing is increasingly a vital part of our modern lives. With over 70 million workdays lost each year in the UK due to mental health problems, it is an issue that affects us all whether as employers or individuals. But more than the figures, the cost of not understanding employees' emotional wellbeing can have subtle yet profound effects upon organisational health and success.

Which is why when Opinium approached MRS to conduct a survey on mental wellbeing in the research community, we were keen to support this vital piece of work. With 1,500 responses from MRS members and customers, the report 'Opening the conversation: mental wellbeing in market research' highlights a range of issues impacting workplace mental wellbeing in our sector.

The findings don't always make for comfortable reading. Stress and its effects on mental health seem particularly high in research compared to the national average for UK workers. The long hours, pressure to meet client deadlines and the intense nature of evidence-focused work means that, as well as already having a level of pressure upon them, researchers may judge themselves a little more harshly in their pursuit of the truth.

**Jane Frost CBE – CEO, Market Research Society**





## We urgently need to talk about mental wellbeing at work.

When a third of market researchers who struggle with their mental health tell us that they avoid telling people for fear it might jeopardise their career (versus a fifth of the general workforce), research land, friends, wonderful clients, and fellow agency heads - we have a serious problem. We need urgent cultural change. And we need it now.

Mental health was a rather taboo topic in the not too distant past, but progress has certainly been made in recent years. Though there is still a way to go.

After developing the first workplace mental wellbeing audit with Warwick University Medical School, we were so delighted when the MRS agreed to partner with us and help us audit our industry. With 1,500 responses, 800 from agencies and 500 from in-house teams, this is the first of its kind, and the first of many.

We are extremely proud to be able to share this report with you, which we hope will accelerate change in market research teams across the UK. As you'll see throughout the report, we've uncovered some of the key issues companies need to address, as well as various initiatives that workplaces can implement along with their impact on mental wellbeing. Addressing mental wellbeing at work may seem like a mammoth task, but it's a journey, and taking that first step in the right direction will kick start wider organisational change which will benefit everyone involved.

**James Endersby – CEO, Opinium**



# INTRODUCTION

## We all have mental wellbeing...

As the world has woken up to how important it is to protect and nurture our mental wellbeing, conversations have been sparked amongst businesses and organisations to try and understand how they can best support their employees and help them thrive.

However, this is easier said than done. In the same way that different plants need different conditions to thrive in, the same sunlight, water and soil doesn't work for everyone. The type of support and initiatives that work for one industry or company can be completely different to what works for another. Initiatives and support that would be welcomed by one level of seniority may be completely useless and irrelevant to another.

So how can employers begin tackling this complex issue and understand what they can do to best support their employees? This spurred us to create a tool that allows employers to understand their employee's mental health in a robust and replicable way, and ultimately to help accelerate change in workplaces across the UK.

## Measuring mental wellbeing in the market research industry

As researchers we spend so much time asking other people questions and understanding their behaviour, we thought it was time to turn the tables and understand what was going on within our own industry. We partnered up with the MRS, who kindly sent our survey to their membership base to allow us to understand what can be done to support market researchers specifically with their mental health.

This report will cover:

- Overall wellbeing and stress at work
- Taking time off for mental health
- Sharing mental wellbeing struggles
- Helping employees thrive – top 3 takeouts for employers

## Our partnership with Warwick University

With an issue as complex and abstract as mental health it is important that any research into the subject is rigorous and methodical, which is why we partnered with the University of Warwick Medical School to incorporate their mental wellbeing scale into our audit. Not only does the scale give our research a robust method for measuring mental wellbeing, it also distinguishes our approach from the myriad of other mental health surveys by giving us a benchmark to work with that is underpinned by academic research.

The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)\* was designed by the University of Warwick with funding from NHS Health Scotland. The scale comprises positive statements, e.g. “I’ve been feeling optimistic about the future”, “I’ve been feeling useful”, “I’ve been feeling relaxed” and so on. Participants are then asked how often they have felt this way in the past two weeks; “None of the time”, “Rarely”, “Some of the time”, “Often”, “All of the time”. The positive nature of these statements marks the WEMWBS out from other mental wellbeing scales in that it captures feeling good and functioning well (not just an absence of mental ill-health), which is important as mental wellbeing is about thriving, and not just surviving.

By taking an average of their fourteen answers, a wellbeing score can be assigned to an individual. The scale enables us to quantify mental wellbeing, thus promoting wider understanding of mental wellbeing as a whole. The scale can also be used to encourage effective improvement of mental wellbeing for the individual, by tracking scores over time, and to equip organisations and wider society to support the enhancement of mental wellbeing.



\*Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) © University of Warwick, NHS Health Scotland and University of Edinburgh, 2007, all rights reserved. If you would like to use the scale, please visit the University of Warwick website for more details: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs/>

## GENERAL WELLBEING AND STRESS

While our national survey of UK workers found that 62% have struggled with their mental health in the last 12 months, over four fifths (85%) of market researchers say they have struggled with their mental wellbeing, a figure significantly above the national average.

### Heightened stress levels in market research

In line with this, while 19% of UK workers say they find their job very stressful (giving it a score of 8-10 with 10 being extremely stressful), this increases to 28% among market researchers. This is even higher amongst agency workers (34%) compared to those working inhouse (22%).

So, what is causing stress among researchers? Over half (59%) of market researchers feel that high workload is their biggest cause of stress, increasing to 65% among agency workers compared to 53% of those inhouse.

#### Top sources of stress at work (vs. national average) - Agency

- 1 My workload/ having too much to do – 65% (vs. 30%)
- 2 Impending deadlines/ targets – 62% (vs. 18%)
- 3 Poor work-life balance (i.e. working late) - 51% (vs. 19%)
- 4 The risk involved in projects going wrong- 50% (vs. 10%)
- 5 Demands from clients - 49% (vs. 18%)

#### Top sources of stress at work (vs. national average) - Inhouse

- 1 My workload/ having too much to do – 53% (vs. 30%)
- 2 Impending deadlines/ targets – 45% (vs. 18%)
- 3 Unclear expectations – 45% (vs. 16%)
- 4 The risk involved in projects going wrong- 39% (vs. 10%)
- 5 Not feeling good at their job – 39% (vs. 13%)



“

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## TAKING TIME OFF WORK

### Physical and mental health – a level playing field?

When it comes to illness, taking time out to rest and recover is what the doctor orders. However, there is a clear disparity in how we treat physical and mental health struggles. Despite the same proportion of Market Research professionals experiencing some form of physical and mental health problems in the past 12 months (both 85% respectively), less than a quarter (23%) took time off for their mental health compared to 59% taking time out for their physical health.

So how does this compare to the national worker picture? As market researchers, we are less likely to take time off for our mental health. Over a third (36%) of UK workers who have struggled with their mental wellbeing in the past 12 months took time off for this, this is compared to just 23% amongst market researchers. By contrast, taking time off for physical health remains on par with the national picture (59% for market research and wider workers).

### Work hard, struggle harder

Workload is the most cited reason for not taking time off for mental health with almost half (47%) stating they had too much to do at work to take time off for their mental wellbeing, considerably higher than the national worker picture (vs. 19%). This is particularly poignant given that workload is what Market Research professionals feel causes them the most stress at work with three in five (59%) feeling stressed by this.

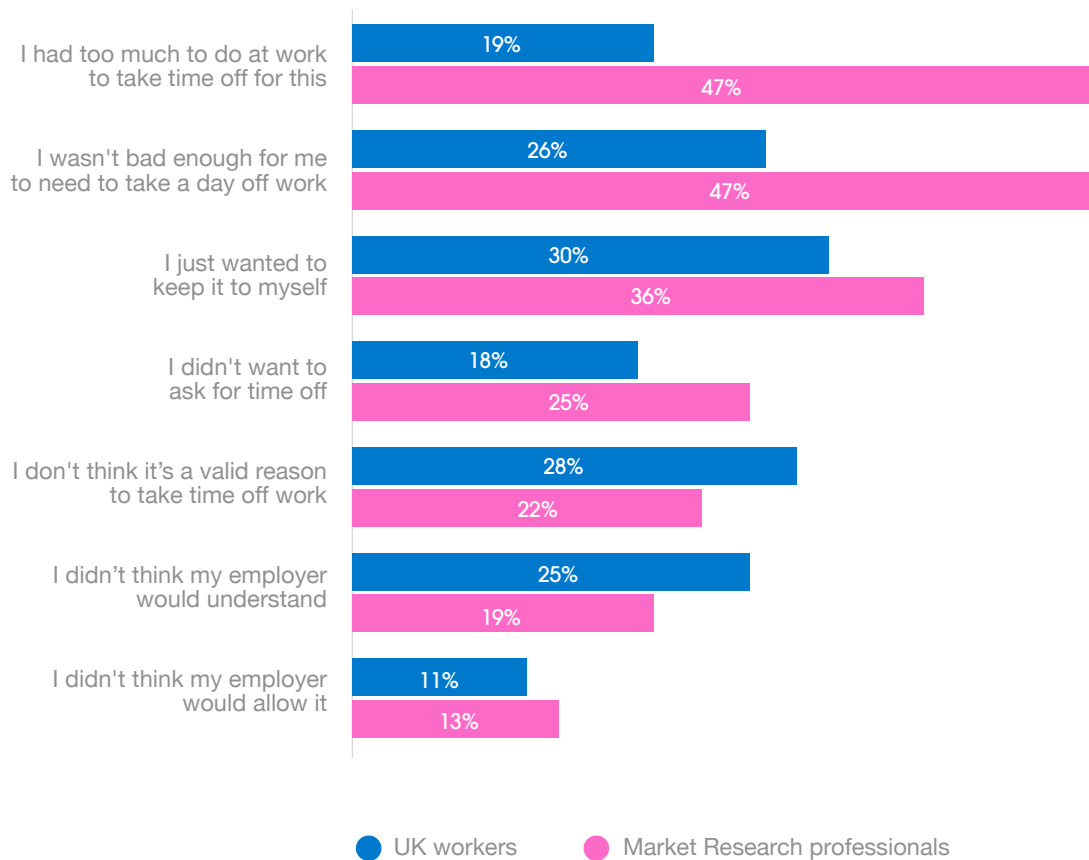
Citing workload as a reason for not taking time out rises even more among agency workers, with over half (52%) of those who have struggled with their mental health in the past 12 months but did not take time out stating this, compared to 41% of those working inhouse.

Reassuringly, a lack of employer understanding is not as much of a reason for Market Research professionals avoiding taking time out for their mental health. With a fifth (19%) not taking time out due to thinking their employer wouldn't understand, compared to a quarter (25%) amongst UK workers.

The full breakdown of reasons for not taking time off work for mental health struggles is shown in the following chart for both market research professionals as well as national workers.



## Mental health - Why didn't you take time off work?



## An open and sincere conversation about mental wellbeing

Compared to the wider worker population, market research as an industry is ahead in terms of employees feeling able to discuss mental health at work and with employers taking the issue seriously:



Almost half (48%) of market research professionals feel they can talk openly about their mental health and wellbeing with their employer, greater than the national picture (40%).



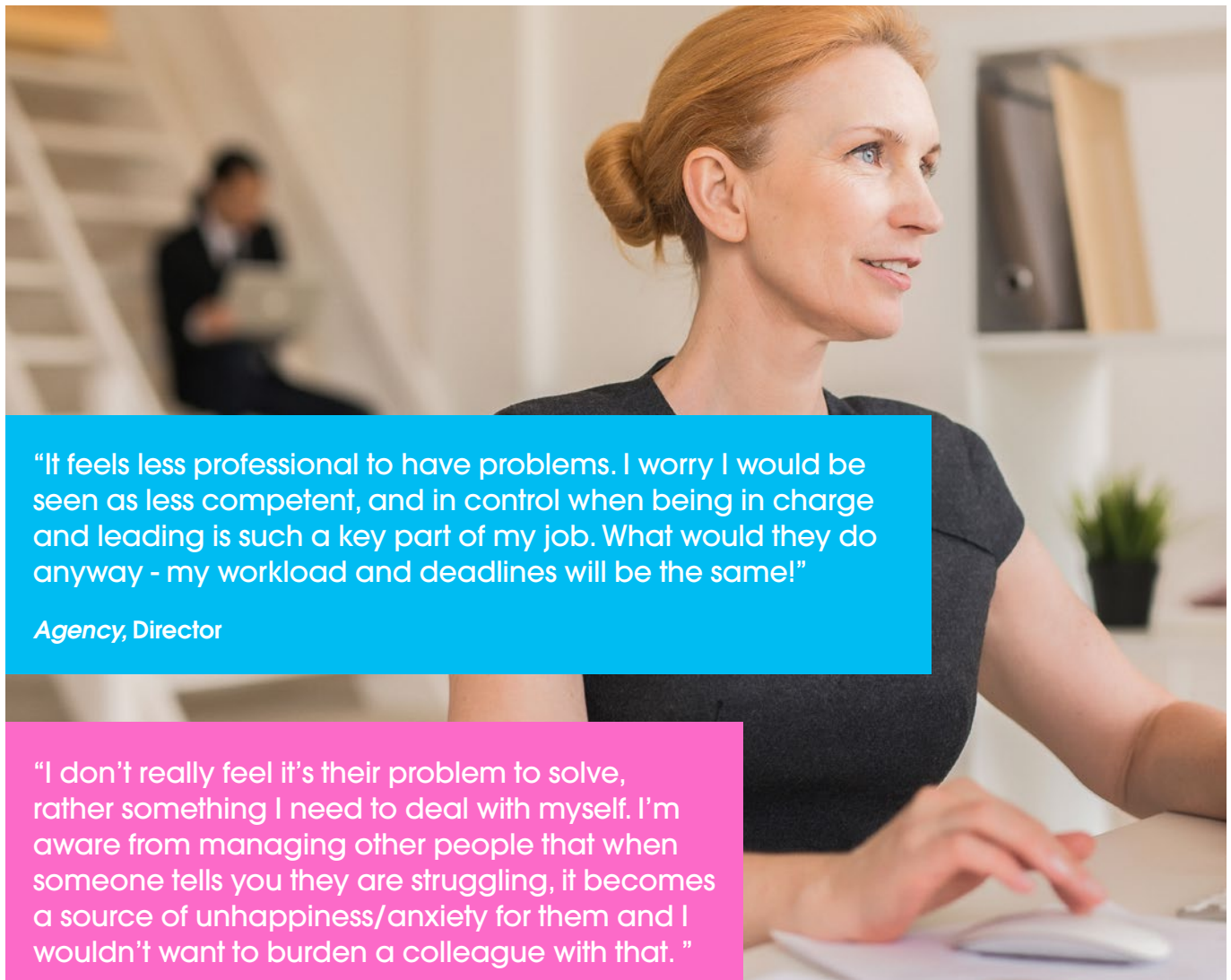
Over half (56%) feel their employer takes the mental health and wellbeing of their staff seriously, compared to 44% of the UK workforce.

## SHARING MENTAL WELLBEING STRUGGLES

### Barriers to sharing mental health struggles

Only 36% of those who struggled with their mental health told an employer about this, higher than the wider worker population (30%). Nearly half (46%) of employees in the market research industry chose not to share their mental health struggle because they didn't feel it was necessary (vs. 36% national picture). But perhaps one of the most poignant obstacles was the 23% who 'didn't think it was appropriate to discuss mental health in their workplace.'

Many mentioned the desire to maintain a 'professional' identity without communicating any 'personal' issues; fearing it could jeopardise their career.



"It feels less professional to have problems. I worry I would be seen as less competent, and in control when being in charge and leading is such a key part of my job. What would they do anyway - my workload and deadlines will be the same!"

*Agency, Director*

"I don't really feel it's their problem to solve, rather something I need to deal with myself. I'm aware from managing other people that when someone tells you they are struggling, it becomes a source of unhappiness/anxiety for them and I wouldn't want to burden a colleague with that."

*Agency, Director*

Perhaps, this begs the question of how helpful our corporate front is in the context of supporting employee mental wellbeing? Alongside this, there is a prominent concern of being pigeon holed with a mental health stigma, acting as another risk to employees opening up:



"I think once you open up about mental health or stress you are forever labelled as someone who can't cope, which is the opposite to my take on my health. For me it's a case of getting back some time to explore other areas of interest and having support to do that."

*Agency, Associate Director*

## Reactive vs preventative sharing styles

Those that did voice concerns often waited until things felt too much, resulting in an explosive and reactive sharing style. Often this was due to heightened anxiety that their work performance and therefore identity was taking the hit:

"I felt I was reaching a point where I would see my work faltering, and my employer would need an explanation. I chose to stop hiding it and explain everything, in the hope they'd understand. They didn't really"

*Inhouse Researcher*

"I was never encouraged to speak up about my mental health at work. In the end I reached a breaking point personally where I had to seek professional help and required time out of work to see a therapist... I told my boss that work was causing me to feel this way but there was no support available internally for them, or I, to do anything about it"

*Agency Researcher*



## HELPING EMPLOYEES THRIVE

Throughout this report we've highlight some key and concerning issues that certainly need addressing in order to help support and improve employee mental wellbeing. We've cultivated 3 key takeouts to better enable employers to take action on this important issue.

### Top 3 takeouts for employers

#### 1. Acknowledge the impact of workload on mental wellbeing and introduce effective workload management processes

With workload being the top source of stress in Market Research, as well as poor work life balance featuring highly, it's important that employers acknowledge and recognise this, and as a result introduce effective workload management processes to support people before it gets too much.

Workload is also a key reason people don't take time off work for their mental wellbeing. Effective workload management processes would also help people feel more comfortable taking time off as they'd feel that their work would be covered by other members of the team.

Market researchers are also explicitly asking employers to introduce these processes to improve their mental wellbeing:

"Guarding against periods of prolonged high-intensity workload and stress through time management and project resourcing."

*Agency, Associate Director on what their employer should do to help support employee mental wellbeing*

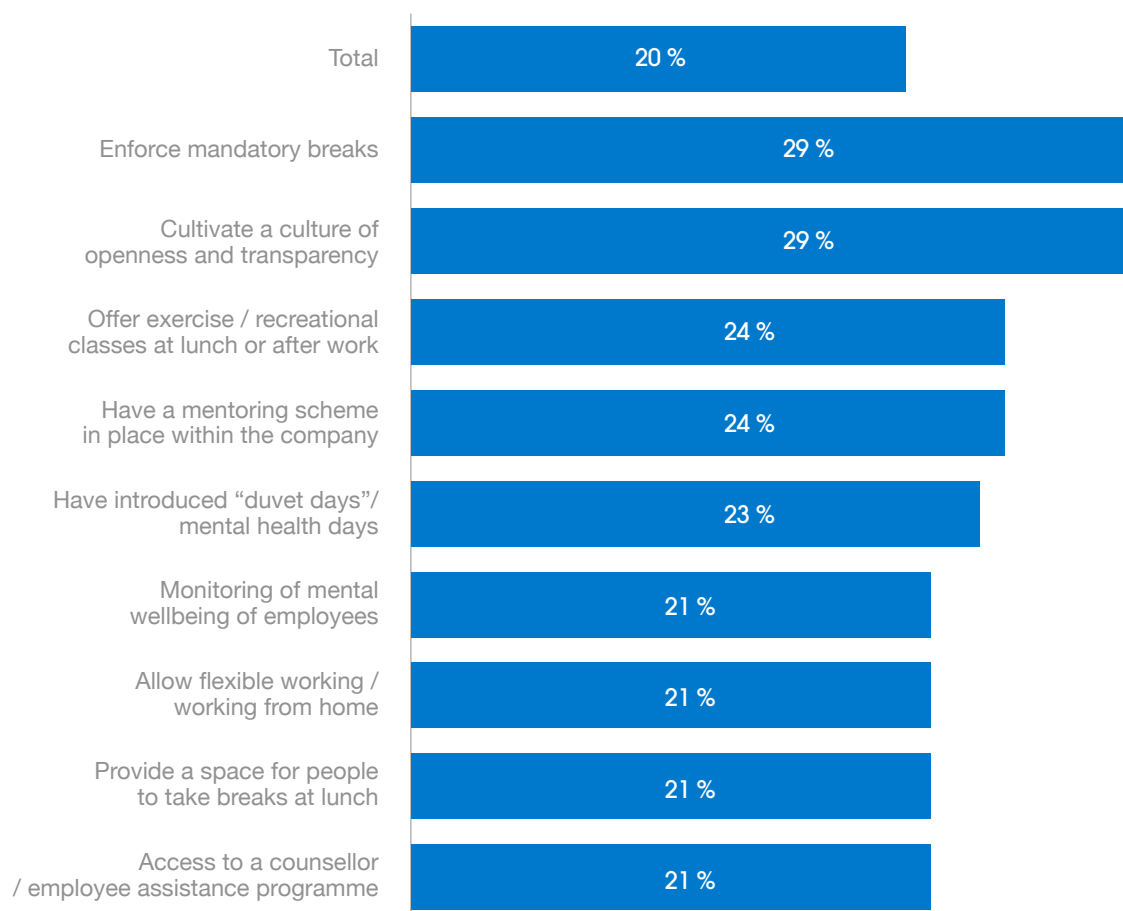


## 2. Offer mental wellbeing initiatives that enhance mental wellbeing

Our research shows that Market Research professionals who were offered certain initiatives had significantly above average mental wellbeing as defined by the WEMWBS. The most effective initiatives were mandatory breaks, open and transparent culture, exercise classes and mentoring schemes. Therefore, employers should aim to introduce these initiatives into their businesses to help employees with their mental wellbeing. Every business is different and so it's important to listen to what employees want as well, and see if it is possible to incorporate these

Further initiatives are shown in the following chart.

### % with significantly above average mental wellbeing

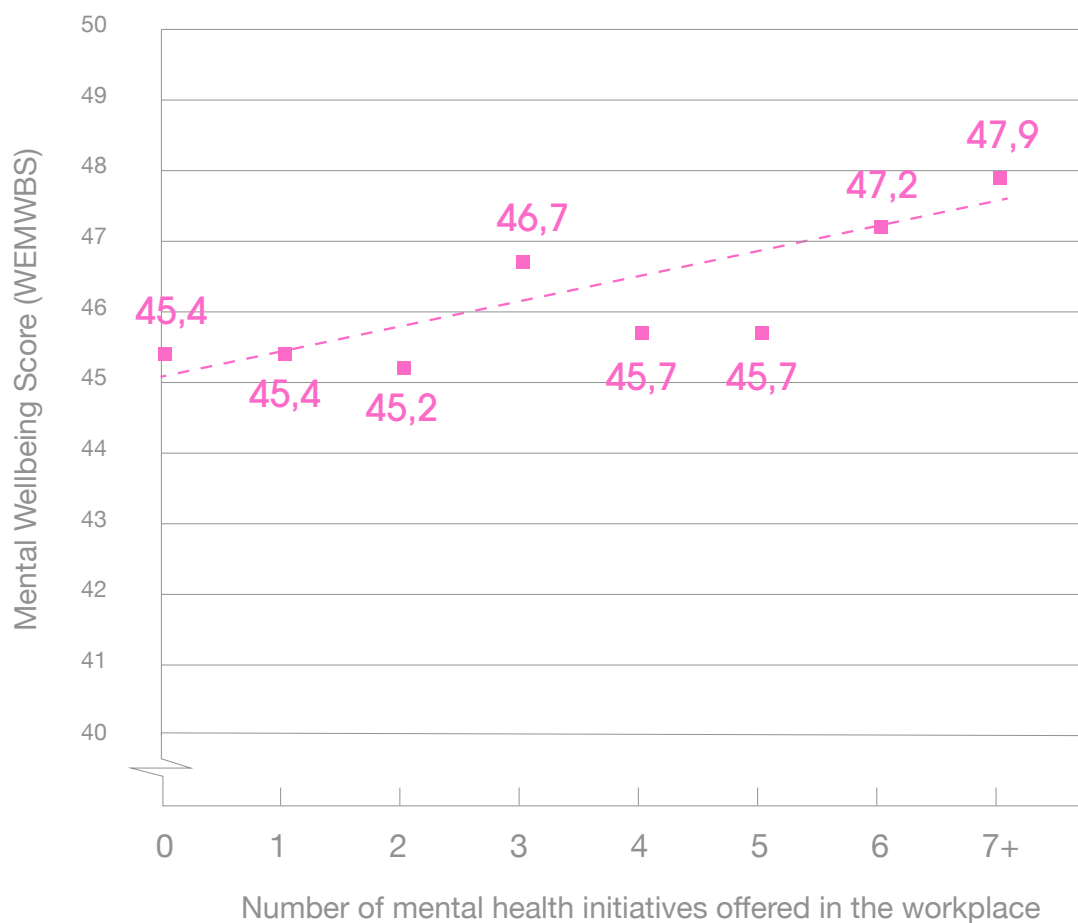


### 3. Embrace mental wellbeing throughout the whole organisation

#### *Offer multiple mental wellbeing initiatives to have the greatest impact on employee mental wellbeing*

The number of initiatives also has an impact on mental wellbeing, with those who are offered more initiatives having higher mental wellbeing, as shown in the chart below. But the greatest impact is when there are more than just one or two initiatives – looking after employee mental wellbeing is more than just a tick-box exercise.

#### Mental wellbeing increases with number of initiatives offered

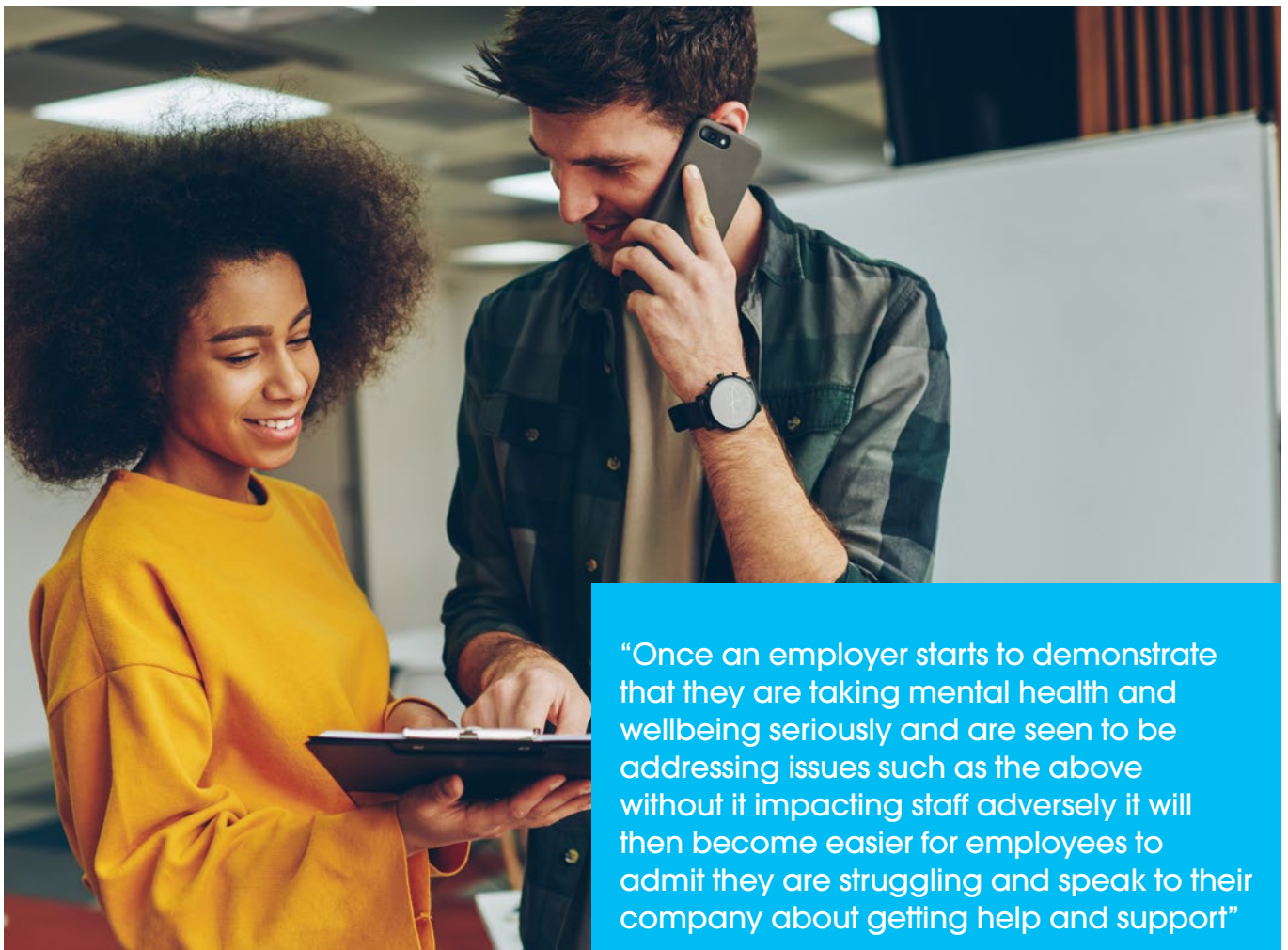




*Nurture a company culture where people can be open about their mental wellbeing without fear of consequence for struggling*

It's important for employers to have the appropriate support systems and initiatives in place to help nurture employee wellbeing, but these are made redundant if employees do not feel comfortable accessing support at work or talking about mental health. For this reason, it is vital that employers strive to embed mental wellbeing into their company culture and have open conversations about mental health.

Currently, those who are struggling with their mental health are waiting until things felt too much to handle, because of fear it will impact their professional development and career. This avoidance resulted in reactive and sometimes explosive styles of sharing with employers. By reassuring employees that it's ok to not be ok, they will feel able to seek help from employers earlier, allowing adjustments to be put in place, resulting in a preventative rather than a reactive approach to mental wellbeing.



“Once an employer starts to demonstrate that they are taking mental health and wellbeing seriously and are seen to be addressing issues such as the above without it impacting staff adversely it will then become easier for employees to admit they are struggling and speak to their company about getting help and support”

*Inhouse Researcher*

## We all have mental wellbeing...

We all have mental wellbeing and should be able to talk about our struggles and reach out for help without fear of consequence on our careers. By talking more about the topic of mental health at work and sharing experiences, we will create an environment where it's commonplace to discuss mental health and where people can bring their full selves to work.

Although the market research sector performs well in some areas compared to the national worker population, there is still a way to go. We hope this report will allow market research agencies and insight departments to accelerate change in their businesses, and ultimately improve the lives of market researchers across the UK.











# A light in the dark

**In financial distress?**

**Maybe MRBA can help.**

With a grant or interest-free loan, we provide support in one of three ways:

1. With bills and other payments when your income has stopped due to not being able to work
2. With a MRBA Skills bursary if you want to complete the MRS Advanced Certificate in Social and Market Research but can't afford the fees
3. With financial assistance for some diagnosed mental health issues

Should you, or anyone you know need our help, please contact us in complete confidence:

T : 0845 652 0303 E : [info@mrba.org.uk](mailto:info@mrba.org.uk) W : [www.mrba.org.uk](http://www.mrba.org.uk)

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## About Opinium

OPINIUM is an award winning strategic insight agency built on the belief that in a world of uncertainty and complexity, success depends on the ability to stay on pulse of what people think, feel and do. Creative and inquisitive, we are passionate about empowering our clients to make the decisions that matter. We work with organisations to define and overcome strategic challenges – helping them to get to grips with the world in which their brands operate. We use the right approach and methodology to deliver robust insights, strategic counsel and targeted recommendations that generate change and positive outcomes.

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## About The MRS

The Market Research Society (MRS) is the UK professional body for research, insight and analytics. We recognise 5,000 members and 550 Accredited Company Partners who are committed to delivering outstanding insight. As the regulator, we promote the highest professional standards throughout the sector via the MRS Code of Conduct. We consult with business and government leaders to ensure that research stays at the forefront of commercial and political agendas, while supporting the sector with specialist training and qualifications, membership, company accreditation, insightful conferences, research awards and advice on best practice.

**[www.mrs.org.uk](http://www.mrs.org.uk)**

**If you would like any more information or support about any of the topics covered in this report, you can find more information at the Mind website: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)**

