



Opening the Conversation: Mental Wellbeing in Public Relations



FOREWORDS

The time for our industry to take action on mental health is now. And this is the latest in the PRCA's concerted effort to do just that.

While it is encouraging to see more practitioners discussing mental health with colleagues, far too many of our colleagues are still suffering.

Our research shows that the industry's 'always-on' culture can place extraordinary pressure on professionals, who feel compelled to work beyond their contracted hours. Alarming, those facing mental health challenges often fail to receive the required level of support.

For too long, our industry has tip-toed around at this issue, but we now have an opportunity to take action and create meaningful change.

Attitudes are changing. Conversations are starting. Let's now enact the recommendations of this report to create tangible change for the future of our workforce.

Francis Ingham MPRCA
PRCA Director General



We urgently need to talk about mental wellbeing at work.

When three in ten PR professionals 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), there is a serious problem. The PR industry needs urgent cultural change. And it needs 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 PRCA agreed to partner with us to help accelerate change in attitudes towards mental health in the PR industry. With over 400 responses, 300 from agencies and 100 from in-house teams, this is the first of its kind, and the first of many.

As you'll see throughout the report, we've uncovered some of the key issues that employers 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. Those 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 Opinium to create a tool to allow employers to understand their employees' mental health in a robust and replicable way, and ultimately to help accelerate change in workplaces across the UK.

Measuring mental wellbeing in the PR and communications industry



One of Opinium's core practise areas is thought leadership and research for PR; giving us an insight into the often busy and stressful lives many PR's live. With this in mind, we wanted to research the industry itself to further understand the pressures and mental well-being of those working in the sector. By partnering with the PRCA we were able to reach over 400 members and gain an understanding of what can be done to support PR professionals specifically with their mental health. Promoting mental wellbeing and reducing the stigma around mental health in the PR industry has been one of the PRCA's main priorities this year. In its research, the PRCA found that 60% of PR and communications practitioners have experienced mental ill-health. This prompted the association to launch the [**PRCA Mental Health Toolkit**](#) to raise awareness about mental health and to give PR practitioners the tools to manage their mental health.

The toolkit also provides employers with resources on how to make the workplace more accommodating of people with mental ill-health. This report is the most comprehensive piece of research the PRCA has ever conducted on mental wellbeing and we hope it will encourage the industry to take positive action on this issue.

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 takeaways for employers

A 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 methodological, 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.

Taking an average of their fourteen answers a wellbeing score can be assigned to an individual which can then be determined in terms of whether it falls above or below the national average. The scale enables us to quantify mental wellbeing, thus promoting wider understanding of mental wellbeing as a whole.

GENERAL WELLBEING AND STRESS

While our national survey of workers found that 62% of UK workers have struggled with their mental health in the last 12 months, over four fifths (89%) of PR professionals surveyed say they have struggled with their mental wellbeing. In line with this, overall mental wellbeing is lower in the PR industry, on average, than the wider worker population as measured by WEMWBS (44.6 vs. 46.2). Further to this, men working in PR also have lower mental wellbeing than women (43.4 vs. 45.1 WEMWBS score).

Heightened stress levels in PR

Stress is likely a contributing factor to poorer average mental wellbeing in PR. Almost a third (31%) of PR professionals say they find their job very stressful (giving it a score of 8-10 with 10 being extremely stressful), compared to just 19% of UK workers overall. Stress levels are even higher amongst agency workers (34%) compared to those working in-house (26%).

So, what is causing stress among PR workers?

Three-fifths (59%) of PRCA members surveyed feel their workload and having too much to do is their biggest cause of stress, increasing to 62% among agency workers compared to 56% of those in-house. Demands from clients (49%) and impending deadlines (48%) are a cause for agency workers while unclear expectations are a source for 51% of those working in-house.



Top sources of stress at work (vs. national worker %)

- 1 My workload / having too much to do – 59% (vs. 30%)
- 2 Impending deadlines / targets – 45% (vs. 18%)
- 3 Demands from clients – 41% (vs. 18%)
- 4 Not feeling good at their job – 41% (vs. 13%)
- 5 Poor work-life balance (i.e. working late) – 40% (vs. 19%)

“ 89% of PR professionals have struggled with the mental wellbeing in the past 12 months ”



TAKING TIME OFF WORK

Physical and mental health – a level playing field?

While taking time out for rest and recovery is always top on the list of what the doctor orders when we experience a dip in our health, there is a clear difference in how we approach this for our physical and mental wellbeing. While more PR professionals reported experiencing struggles with their mental health in the last year compared to their physical health (89% struggled with their mental health vs 81% who struggled with their physical health), just 31% took time off work to recover for their mental health compared to 63% who took time off for their physical health.

So how does this compare to the national picture? PR professionals are slightly less likely to take time off for their 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, compared to 31% of PR professionals. By contrast, taking time off for physical health is actually slightly more common in PR than the national picture (63% for PR vs 59% amongst wider workers)

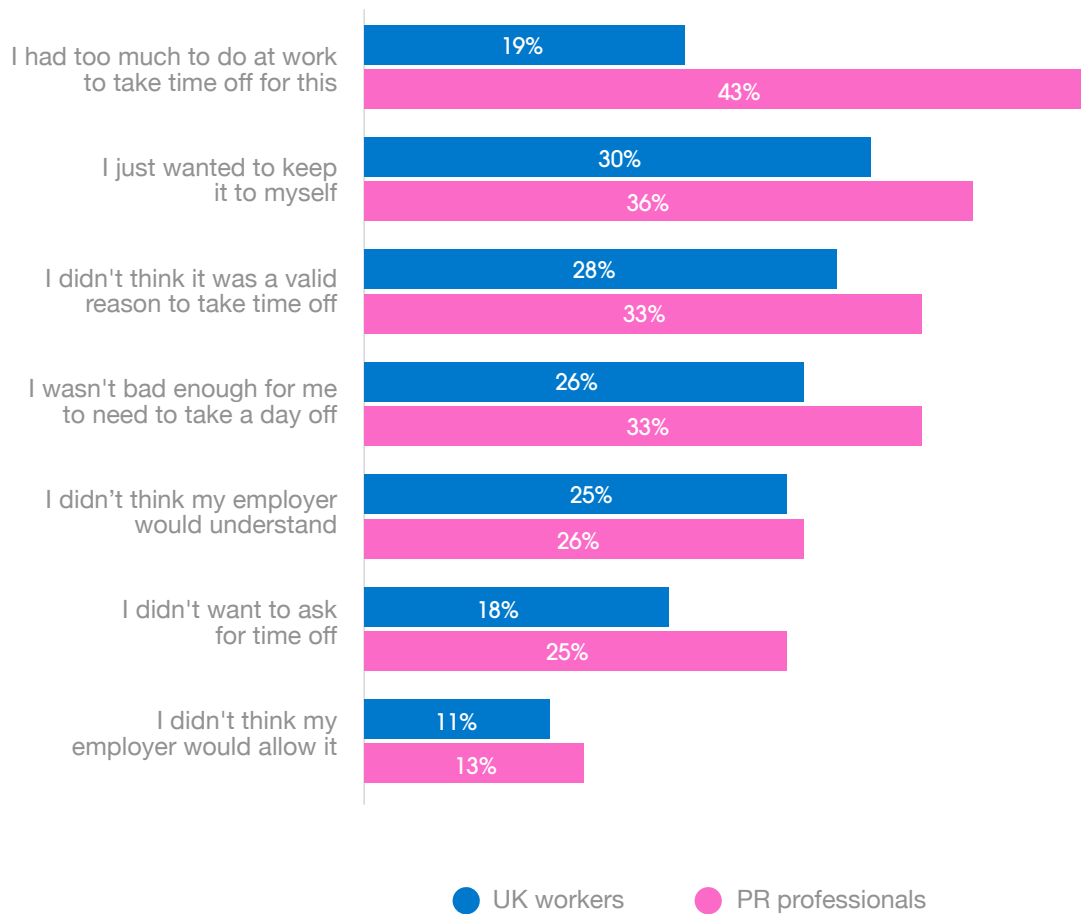
Keep your head down and keep working

Workload is the biggest driver of the reluctance to take time off for mental health reasons amongst PR professionals. Having too much work to do at the time (43%) is the most cited reason for not taking time off, considerably higher than the national picture (19%). This is also poignant considering that workload and having too much to do (59%) is what makes PR professionals feel most stressed at work.

There is also a reluctance to make their feelings known, with 36% saying they didn't take time off because they just wanted to keep it to themselves, higher than the 30% of UK workers who felt the same. This is also higher amongst those working in-house (45%) compared to agency side (33%). The full breakdown of reasons for not taking time off work for mental health struggles is shown in the following chart for both PR professionals and national workers.

Those who did take time off for their mental health said that they returned to work feeling much better after taking some time off (56%), and that the quality of their work improved (66% PR workers vs. 59% national workers). However, many still felt guilty about taking the day off for their mental health (68%) which is considerably higher than national workers (54%).

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



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Workload is the biggest driver of the reluctance to take time off for mental health amongst PR professionals

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TALKING ABOUT MENTAL WELLBEING

An open and sincere conversation about mental wellbeing

Compared to the wider worker population, as an industry the PR world is ahead in terms of employees feeling able to discuss mental health at work and feeling like employers are taking their mental health seriously.



While 44% feel they can talk to their colleagues openly about their mental health, almost half (47%) feel they can talk to their manager or employer openly. In comparison only 38% of UK workers feel they can talk openly to their colleagues and 40% to their manager or employer. However, there is progress to be made as these numbers still only represent less than half of workers in the PR industry.



Over half (53%) feel their employer takes the mental health and wellbeing of their employees seriously, compared to the national figure of 44%. 54% also say their employer has introduced programs or policies to look after employee mental health compared to the national average of 35%.

Opening up about mental health struggles

Of those in the PR industry who have struggled with their mental health, 43% have told an employer about this, higher than the national average of 30%. Half (52%) of those who told their employer said that they were understanding and supportive (considerably higher than the national average of 38%).

We asked those who had told their employer about their mental health what made them feel they were able to share their feelings with their employer. While some waited until everything had gotten too much and they felt they had no choice but to share, others felt supported and comfortable enough with their manager to share their feelings.

“A good manager recognised that I was behaving differently and took me aside to ask if I was ok. I wouldn't have said anything if I didn't know how supportive my manager was.”

Account Manager



"I had no choice. I was at breaking point and I knew if I didn't say something then I might not make it to work in the morning."

Head of Department/ Team

"The openness of the company made it a no-brainer really. Also I had a really friendly manager who made me feel comfortable talking."

PR/ Communications Manager


Barriers to opening up about mental health struggles

However, over half (54%) say they have not told their employer when they were struggling with their mental health. The biggest reason for this was not feeling it was necessary (35%) and worrying concerns about jeopardising their career was higher than the national picture at 28%.

Main barriers to opening up:

- Not feeling it necessary to tell them (35% vs. national average 36%)
- Thinking it may jeopardise their career (28%), higher than the national average of 19%
- Feeling that their employer won't be able to help (24%)

When we asked those who didn't tell their employer they were struggling with their mental health why this was, many kept it to themselves because they didn't want to be perceived as weak or bad at their job. Some also said they didn't want to burden others with their workload if they took time off, while others didn't feel like telling their manager would affect any change.



"I knew - not felt - that I would be judged for being weak. As a woman, I'm especially conscious of appearing weak and not confident and want to steer as clear of that image as possible."

Female, Account Manager

"I feel like my employers would not take me seriously and would also mock me among themselves. I don't think there would be any action or change in the things that mainly affect my mental health within the workplace (i.e. the way my line manager speaks to me), and it would cause aggravation for no reason and with no resolution."

Female, Account Manager

"Lack of confidentiality within the company and no actual person to speak to about this that would be able to help. I have previously discussed it with MD and nothing was done, nor did it feel like it was taken seriously. The company only reacts to issues when people decide to leave, which is far too late."

Male, Head of Department/ Team

HELPING EMPLOYEES THRIVE

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

Top 3 takeaways for employers

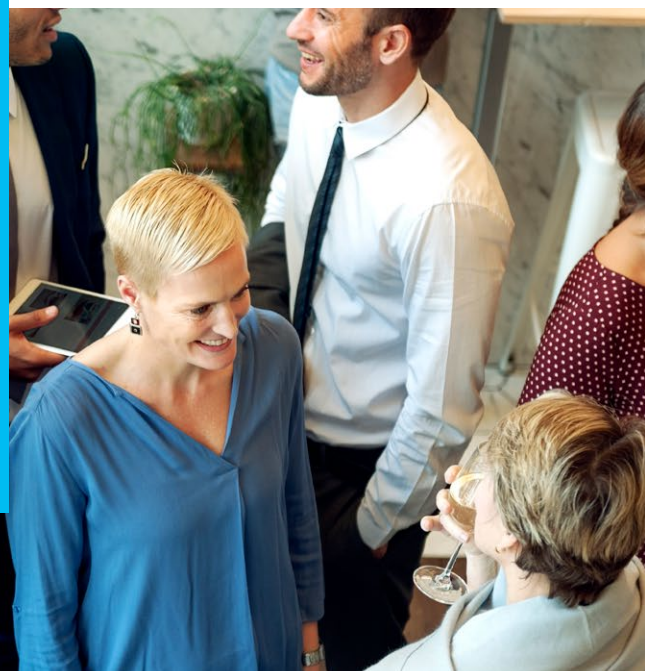
1. Recognising the impact of workload on mental health and introducing effective workload management techniques

Workload is the biggest source of stress for PR professionals, and this is likely contributing to the lower mental wellbeing scores in PR. Employers need to first acknowledge that workload can have a negative impact on workers' lives, and secondly introduce procedures that effectively highlight when an individual is struggling with their workload and processes for how this is tackled and resolved.

Workload is also a key reason why people don't take time off work for their mental wellbeing. Employers can help combat this by encouraging people to flag up when they are struggling with their workload and having processes in place so that employees don't feel they have to struggle in silence.

"Workload needs to be addressed, as well as unrealistic expectations when staff numbers have reduced, and workload increased. The myth of doing more with less is untenable and results in increased stress and pressure. There are policies in place, but this is not followed up or directed from the top, so it isn't seen to be a priority. There needs to be clear direction and support from the top, as well as understanding and the right resourcing for the role expectation."

Female, AHead of Department/ Team

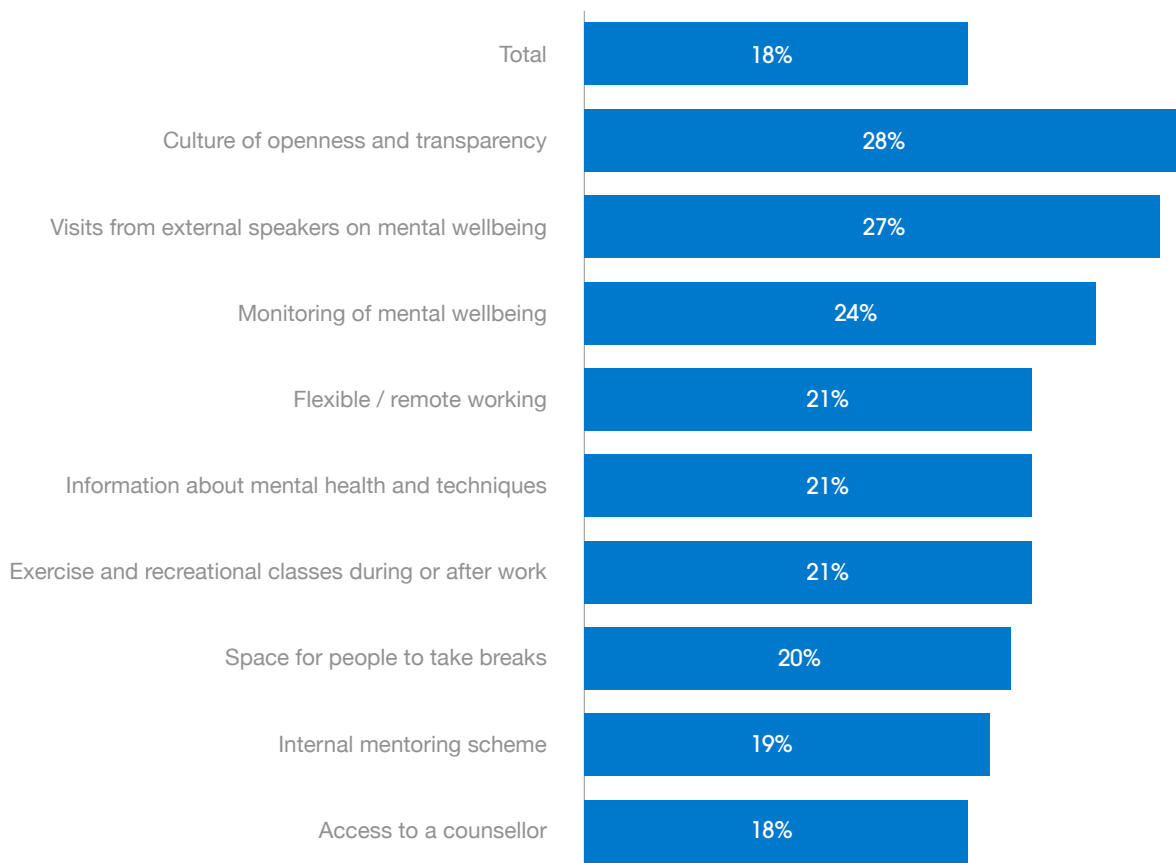


2. Offer mental wellbeing initiatives that enhance mental wellbeing and encourage their usage

Our research shows that PR professionals offered the certain initiatives had significantly above average mental wellbeing as defined by the WEMWBS. The most effective initiatives were having an open and transparent culture, visits from external speakers on mental wellbeing, and monitoring of employee mental wellbeing (e.g. via surveys). 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 changes.

Further initiatives are shown in the following chart.

% of people offered this initiative with considerably above average mental wellbeing

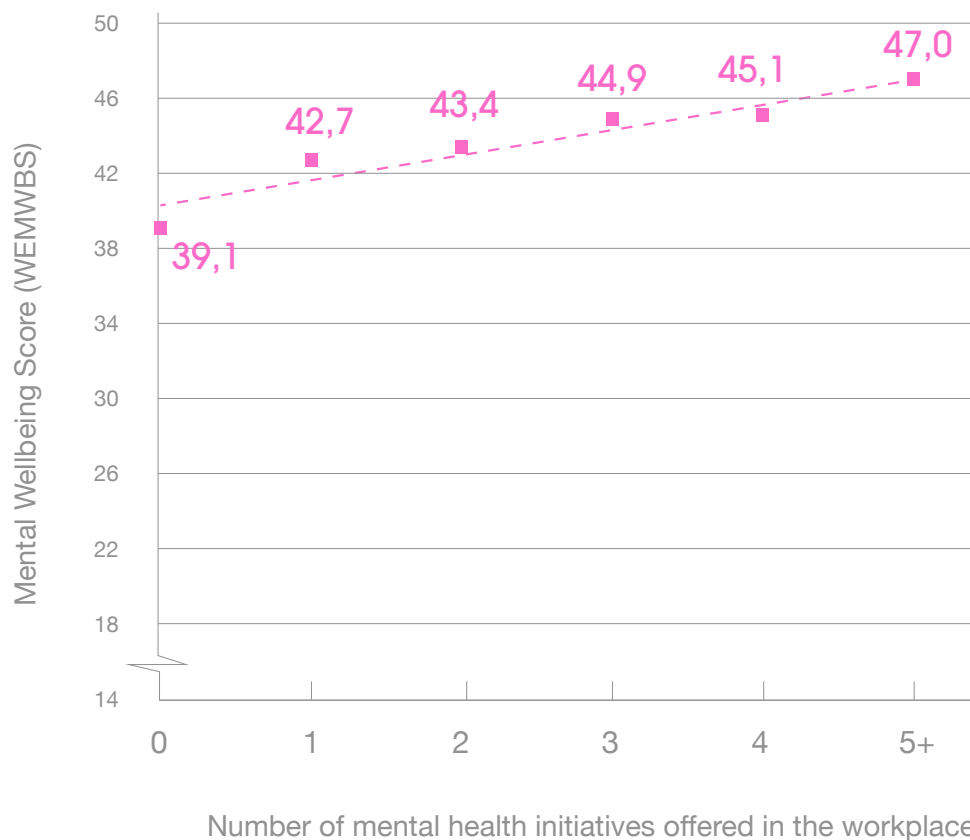


3. Embrace mental wellbeing throughout the whole organisation

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. 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 their 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.

The PR industry is already ahead of the wider worker population in terms of being open about mental health struggles, with more people having open conversations with employers, and employers are also more supportive. This is a great start, but the numbers are still low and there is certainly room for improvement.

There is a particular need to reassure employees that being open about mental health struggles and taking time off for this will not have a negative impact on their career, as many cite this as a reason for avoiding opening up. Employers are unable to help employees unless they are aware they are struggling so it is vital that companies create a culture where people feel able to bring their full selves to work, and that employee openness is met with non-judgement and proactive support from management.

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 fearing the consequences it may have on our careers. To do this we need to create an inclusive environment where it's commonplace to discuss mental health by sharing experiences. Sharing of experiences is at its most powerful when senior leaders are open about their experiences, giving employees the confidence to do the same.

The good news is that the PR and communications industry performs above average on some areas, especially in our willingness to talk about our struggles. However, we still need to find better ways of managing workload and deadlines within the workplace as this is the biggest source of stress for PR professionals. While there is still some way to go to help employees thrive, we should not be discouraged, as our industry is making important strides on this issue. We hope this report will encourage employers to accelerate change in their businesses, and ultimately improve the lives of PR professionals across the UK.



"Employers NEED to take work-life balance a lot more seriously. Working from home should be allowed more, financial targets need to be realistic and shouldn't make employers feel like they are burning out just so it lines the pockets of their employer. Employers should openly encourage their employees to discuss mental health in the workplace and have an open forum for ideas to ensure a healthy, happy workplace."

Male, Head of Department/ Team



AUTHORS



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Sophie is passionate about mental health and holds a BA Hons in Experimental Psychology from the University of Oxford. As well as heading up Opinium's workplace mental health research team, Sophie works on a variety of different projects from design to delivery, ranging from large-scale quantitative research and international studies, to in-depth qualitative pop-up communities. Sophie is heavily involved in the brand and comms space, charity sector and social research.

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As the Public Affairs, Policy, and Research Manager at the PRCA, Neha heads up the PRCA's campaigning work on mental health, diversity and inclusion, the gender pay gap, and internships. Neha has produced research publications on these issues as well as working on the PRCA's annual PR and Communications Census. Neha holds a BA in History and Politics from the University of Warwick and MSc in History of International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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Chloe works on a variety of different projects ranging from in-depth qualitative pop-up communities to large quantitative research pieces, managing projects from beginning to end across a range of sectors including, B2B and finance. While Chloe predominantly works across the brand and communications space, she has a particular interest in mental health and has a first class degree in Psychology.



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Robyn works across quantitative and qualitative methodologies and has worked on a number of international studies. Most recently Robyn has conducted research for a market leading healthcare organisation into the availability and awareness of healthcare apps among business decision makers and employees.

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 PRCA

Who we are: Founded in 1969, the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) is a UK-based PR and communications membership body, operating in 66 countries around the world. Representing in excess of 30,000 people, the PRCA is the largest PR membership association in the world. The PRCA promotes all aspects of public relations and communications work, helping teams and individuals maximise the value they deliver to clients and organisations.

What we do: The Association exists to raise standards in PR and communications, providing members with industry data, facilitating the sharing of communications best practice and creating networking opportunities.

How we do it and make a difference: All PRCA members are bound by a professional charter and codes of conduct, and benefit from exceptional training. The Association also works for the greater benefit of the industry, sharing best practice and lobbying on the industry's behalf e.g. fighting the NLA's digital licence

www.prca.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

