

A woman with curly hair, wearing an orange jacket, is pointing at a computer monitor. A man with a beard and a green shirt is looking at the screen. The background is a modern office with large windows and concrete pillars.

Continuing the Conversation: Mental Wellbeing in Public Relations 2020

FOREWORDS

It has never been more important for our industry to take action on mental health. The progress made in recent years has been welcome: more and employers recognise the importance of mental wellbeing by offering their staff support; they actively encourage conversations about mental health in the workplace. And employees have responded by being far more candid than was the case even five years ago. Our industry should be proud of this progress. But it is not enough.

Too many people still don't feel comfortable opening up about their mental health. And there is still a minority of employers who don't want them to. And Covid has made it more important than ever that we do more than ever. From the conversations I have every day, there is enormous pressure on pretty much everybody right now. At one end, junior employees working from home in cramped and crude surroundings. At the other end, bosses are fighting hard to lead; to reform their working practices; to put their organisations on firm footings. And for everyone, there are the worries of job security as we enter a global recession.

Which is why publications like this are so important our industry. And why the PRCA will continue to shine a spotlight on this issue in the years ahead.

Francis Ingham MPRCA
Director General, PRCA



It has been a challenging year for people working in PR. The stress of Covid-19 and the impact on the industry has been vast and has negatively impacted mental wellbeing scores for the sector.

But encouragingly, thanks to agency leaders, there has also been some progress made since we launched our first workplace mental wellbeing report with the PRCA in 2019. Employers are clearly focusing their energies on mental health more, and PR professionals are noticing this, with 64% saying that they feel their employer takes the mental health and wellbeing of employees seriously (vs. 53% in 2019). But the stress of unmanageable workloads is still an issue, and the biggest source of stress. The impact of coronavirus on the company is, understandably, the second biggest source of stress (44%).

Covid has posed many challenges to the industry, but has clearly taught agencies and in-house teams to adapt. Some of these more positive changes to working life, such as increased flexibility, could be built into working life in the months and years ahead. 96% told us that they want to continue to work from home, in some capacity, post-covid. Although it is clear from our research that businesses should implement some form of balance around this. While the period of full-time working from home has had mental wellbeing benefits for some, sadly it has also had detrimental effects for others. Our research shows that 40% feel working from home during lockdown improved their mental wellbeing, while 41% said that it actually reduced their wellbeing. If at all possible, business leaders in PR should look to take an individualistic approach when it comes to flexible working in the future and try to account for each employee's specific needs and circumstances.

Huge thanks to the PRCA for teaming up with us again on this important piece of work. And to our employee engagement team for conducting the workplace mental wellbeing audit and authoring this useful report. We hope it gives agencies and in-house teams actionable insights and recommendations to continue to support their colleagues and improve workplace wellbeing.

James Endersby
CEO, Opinium



BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Continuing the Conversation: Mental wellbeing in Public Relations 2020

Much progress has been made in the area of mental health in the last several years; talking about it openly and honestly has become more commonplace, and governments and businesses have recognised that they have a major role to play in helping people look after their mental wellbeing.

We designed our Workplace Mental Wellbeing Audit to help businesses and other organisations understand the mental health of their employees and in turn take steps to help them. This year's study, our second since the audit's launch, was made all the more pertinent by the outbreak of the coronavirus and the subsequent lockdown. A combination of being isolated from friends and family, a major economic downturn, and of course the threat to our physical health, create an environment that is far from conducive to good mental wellbeing.

On the subject of the economic fallout of the virus, different sectors are affected in very different ways. For this study we partnered with the PRCA to look specifically at the mental wellbeing of those working in the PR and communications industry and how they are coping in the context of a pandemic.

Throughout the report, we also compare to last year's results, as well as our normative database of national workers.

The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)

A key element of our audit is the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale*; a rigorous and scientific method designed by the University of Warwick with funding from NHS Health Scotland. 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.

Looking at the scores of the scale, the mental wellbeing of an individual can 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. A further use of the scale is 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.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Recommendations

The research provided us with a wealth of data to analyse and deciding which findings to focus on was no easy task but in summary we found three important recommendations for employers in the PR industry:

1. Importance of sharing stories

Our data shows that the culture around mental health has started to shift, as those who spoke up saw benefits. However, there is still work to do amongst those who are struggling and did not speak up. We've seen that Covid-19 has had a huge impact on the industry, despite this we've seen an improvement in attitudes overall. Our recommendation is on the importance of sharing stories in a relatable manner to create a workplace where mental health can be discussed openly and without fear of consequence.

2. Promote existing initiatives and introduce new ones

There has been an increase in the number of employers offering mental wellbeing initiatives to employees, which is great to see! The challenge now comes with ensuring employees understand how to access these initiatives and feel comfortable using them. There are also a number of initiatives that show demonstrable impacts on mental wellbeing, such as remote working and flexible working hours, employers should prioritise the introduction of these if they are not already in place. Employers should also listen to employees when it comes to supporting mental wellbeing, as there are several initiatives that there is employee demand for, but are only being offered by a handful of employers.

3. Learn from the lockdown

A key part of the research showed that the working from home aspect of the lockdown provided a number of benefits for employees; they were more relaxed, enjoyed avoiding the commute, and had more time for other hobbies and interests. That said, the picture was not all perfect and not everything about lockdown was easy. For employers we recommend learning how to make some of these changes to working patterns permanent: greater flexibility, trust in your staff, and so on.

KEY FINDINGS



64%

say their current workplace takes the health and wellbeing of their employees seriously

59%

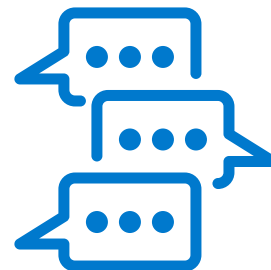
of those in PR who struggled with their mental health told their employer

72%

of those who took time off for their mental wellbeing told their employer that this time off was actually for their mental wellbeing

46%

of those who didn't take time off work for their mental health, said that they didn't feel that mental health was a valid reason to do so



67%

say that having too much work to do was the main cause of stress

66%

say not having to commute whilst in lockdown has improved their mental health

52%

are concerned about the practicality of socially distanced desks when they return to work



96%

want working from home practices to continue in some way after the lockdown

1. IMPORTANCE OF SHARING

Compared to the national figures from last year, there seems to be a slightly better culture geared toward acceptance and understanding when it comes to accepting mental health generally in the workplace. More PR professionals feel comfortable discussing their mental wellbeing with fellow colleagues and reported positive feedback. Yet, change is still needed. 46% of PR professionals did not share their mental health struggles with employers as they did not think it was necessary and 48% refused to take time off because of “having too much to do”. If these issues aren’t tackled, the fear is employee’s mental wellbeing will deteriorate in the long run. Sharing positive stories of overcoming issues in a relatable manner will be key in this instance, to create a safe space for employees to air their concerns and take time off to recover if needed.

Slight decline in mental wellbeing scores since 2019

We’ve seen a slight decline in mental wellbeing scores this year, which is unsurprising given the challenges posed by the pandemic particularly for the PR sector. The average WEMWBS score among those in the PR industry is 43.5 this year compared to 44.6 last year. Junior PR professionals scores have the lowest score at 39.9. Looking specifically at experiences over the past 12 months, 90% have struggled with their mental wellbeing to some degree, this is stable with last year’s figure of 89%.

PR professionals also still find their job more stressful compared to the national average this year. A quarter (26%) of PR professionals say they find their job stressful (giving it a score of 8-10, 10 being extremely stressful), compared to 18% of UK workers. Having too much to do was the top cause of stress this year (55%), followed by the impact of Coronavirus on the company (44%), and poor work-life balance (43%). PR professionals are much more likely to worry about the impact of coronavirus on their company compared to the UK workers overall (11%).



The culture around mental health has started to shift as those who spoke up saw the benefits...

Almost three fifths (59%) of PR professionals told someone at work that they struggled with their mental health, compared to 43% in 2019. This increase is encouraging and is also higher than the national worker benchmark of 39%. They were most likely to tell their line manager (51%).

Those who were comfortable to share, generally reported a positive experience. Almost three quarters (72%) said the colleagues they told were understanding and supportive (up from 52% last year) and only 10% said they did not take it seriously enough (down from 22% last year).

Expanding upon their experiences, those who spoke up said they felt heard and were offered support initiatives, time off and reduced workloads.

“They were empathetic, offered support and a listening ear, suggested programmes and tools that could help and agreed practical to my work that would help (e.g. time off work, more flexible working etc.)”

“Very supportive, a readjustment of my workload was arranged, and time off provided.”

However, whilst progress has been made, there is more that can be done to support the long-term mental health of employees, as concerns with workload remain.

“Management are supportive but there is also a view to just get on with it, work has to be done and everyone struggles at some point”

“They were supportive but also said that long work hours and competing deadlines is just part of the job”

“They were kind and encouraged me to take a long weekend.... however, the long-term issues such as immense workload, rude and disrespectful client behaviour... were not addressed.”

Two fifths (39%) of those who struggled with their mental health did not discuss it with an employer. Alarming, the top reasons why included ‘I didn’t feel it necessary to tell them’ (46%) and ‘I didn’t think they would be able to help’ (33%). In open text responses, many mentioned stress ‘being part of the job’ and fears of how struggling with their mental health would reflect on them professionally.

“I’ve had bouts of anxiety in the past, usually to do with workload, but didn’t feel I could tell anyone, or it would look like I couldn’t deal with pressure of the job. I think stress/pressure kind of comes with the role when it’s busy. That is just agency life.”

Yet, there has been a decline in the number of PR professionals taking time off

Since last year, there’s been a decline in the number of PR professionals who struggled with their mental health took time off for this. In 2020 a quarter (26%) of PR professionals took time off for mental health, declining from 31% in 2019. Those in senior level positions were less likely to take time off for mental health at 22% compared to junior staff at 32%.

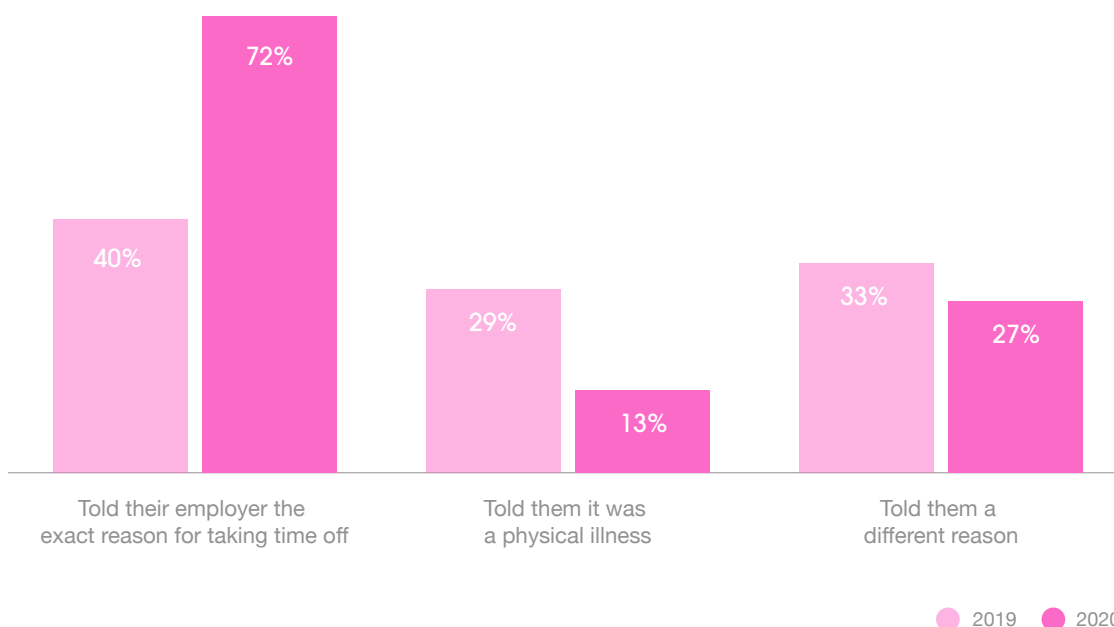
Having too much on at work to take time off (48%, up from 43% 2019) and feeling that their mental health problem was not bad enough to need a day off (46% up from 33% 2019) were the main reasons cited for not taking time off. Those in senior level positions in particular were much more likely to feel that it wasn’t bad enough for them to take time off (52%).

There are some positive changes to be mentioned too, the number of those who felt their mental health wasn’t a valid reason to take time off decreased to 23%, from 33% last year. And those not taking time off for their mental health because they didn’t think their employer would understand is also down to 21%, from 26% last year.

PR professionals who have taken time off for their mental are also being more open about this with employers.

This year there has been a large increase in the number of PR professionals who have told their employer the exact reason for taking time off for mental health. In 2020, 72% of those who took time off for their mental health told their employer that this was for their mental health, whereas in 2019 this was at 40%.

Did you tell your employer the exact reason why you needed to take time off? (mental health)

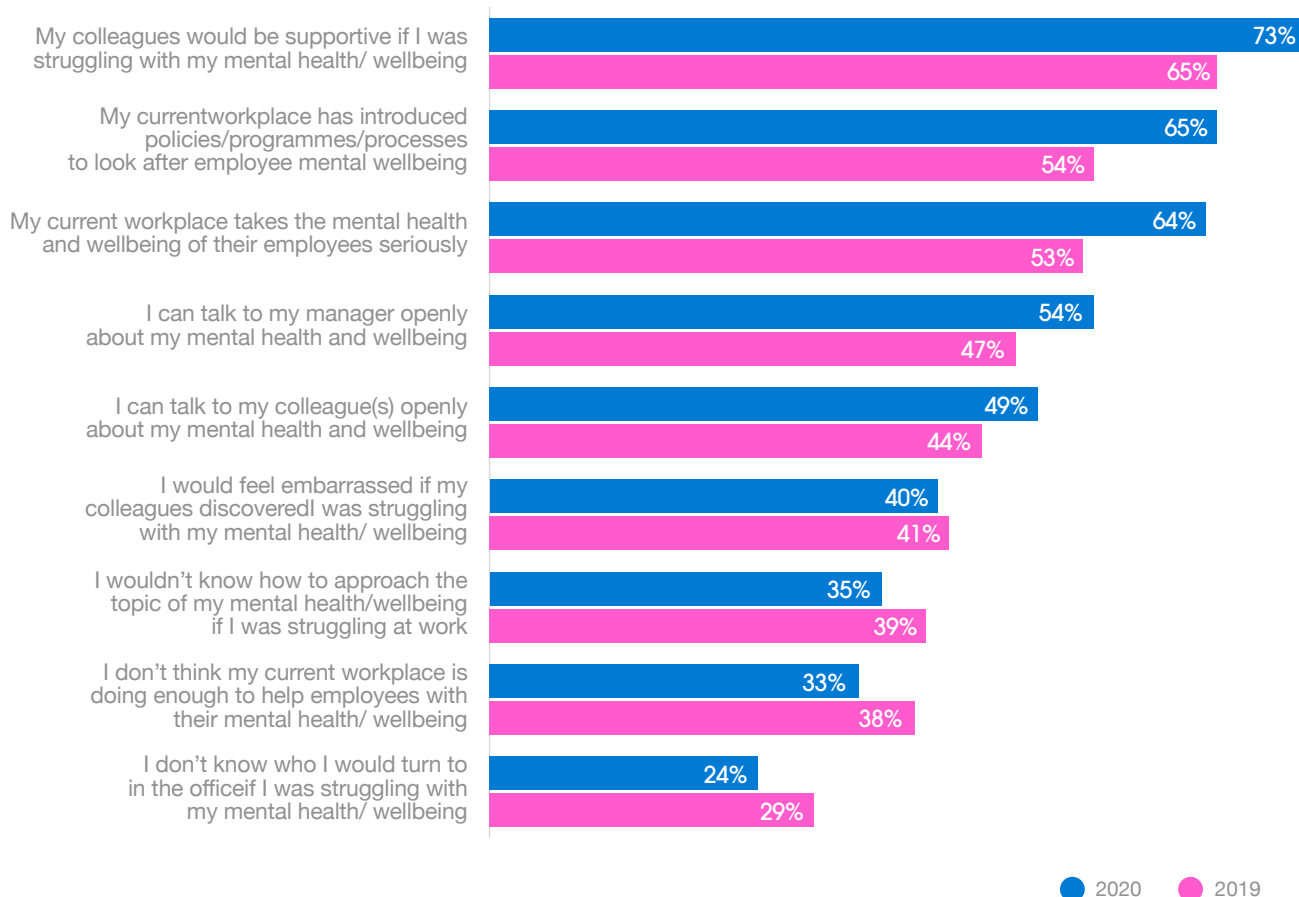


Attitudes in general around mental health have seen the largest improvements

PR professionals are more likely to feel their workplace takes the mental health of their employees seriously, 64% compared to 53% in 2019. There is also more belief that they would be supported at work if they were struggling with their mental health, 65% up from 56% in 2019. Openness in talking to colleagues has slightly improved, up to 49% compared to 44% last year.

But there is more work to be done here, as over a third (35%) would still not know how to approach the topic of mental health if they were struggling at work, though this is down from 39% last year. There are also still feeling of embarrassment about struggling with mental health, as 40% of PR professionals say they would feel embarrassed if their colleagues discovered they were struggling, stable with 41% last year. There clearly exists a belief that colleagues will have negative perceptions and reactions mental health problems, which contradicts those who have spoken out and found colleagues to be supportive of their struggles.

Attitudes towards mental health in the workplace



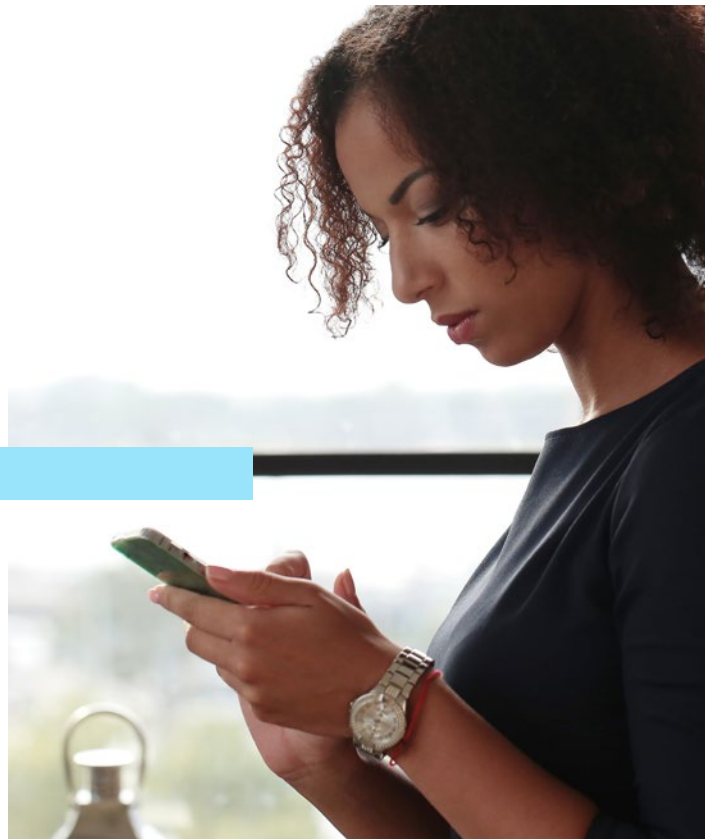
Still work to do...

Whilst there have been some positive changes in attitudes, there is still work to do around creating a safe space for PR professionals to share their struggles. Workload is a key reason why PR professionals don't take time off for mental health, and is also a key source of stress – a damaging combination which results in a vicious cycle. This needs to be addressed by employers first and foremost, as it is a root cause of much employee stress and exacerbates mental health problems.

This highly stressful environment of heavy workload is then combined with employee perceptions that struggling with mental health is a reflection on their professional ability. Therefore, many employees who are struggling keep silent and do not take time off. Employers need to work at cultivating a safe environment where employees can discuss their mental wellbeing without consequence, reassuring staff that their mental wellbeing is a priority.

Having a more open conversation about mental health in the workplace and sharing stories amongst those who have opened up will help with this much needed culture shift.

Covid-19 has also badly affected the industry, adding to the stress and pressure on the mental health of PR professionals. The key is to not overlook these issues, whilst progress has started, employee fear around risking their careers when speaking up about mental health and workload are still high. This can threaten the industry progress that's been made over the past year and cause a decline in mental wellbeing in the years to come. Employers need to acknowledge and address the impact of Covid-19 on employee wellbeing, as well as the company itself, by openly discussing the current situation.



2. PROMOTE EXISTING INITIATIVES AND INTRODUCE NEW ONES

There has been an increase in the number of employers offering mental wellbeing initiatives to employees, which is great to see! The challenge now comes with ensuring employees understand how to access these initiatives and feel comfortable using them. There are also a number of initiatives that show demonstrable impacts on mental wellbeing, and employees are asking for additional initiatives to be introduced. Based on this, we have several recommendations to employers:



Introduce initiatives that positively impact mental wellbeing. There are specific initiatives, such as remote working and working from home, that have demonstrable effects on mental wellbeing, employers who do not already offer these should prioritise introducing them.



Ensure that employees understand how to access initiatives and also promote the usage of these, giving reassurance to employees about using these initiatives will boost usage and ultimately employee mental wellbeing.



Listen to employees when it comes to the wellbeing initiatives that will be most useful to them. Hearing this feedback directly from employees will enable employers to identify new initiatives that will boost employee mental wellbeing.

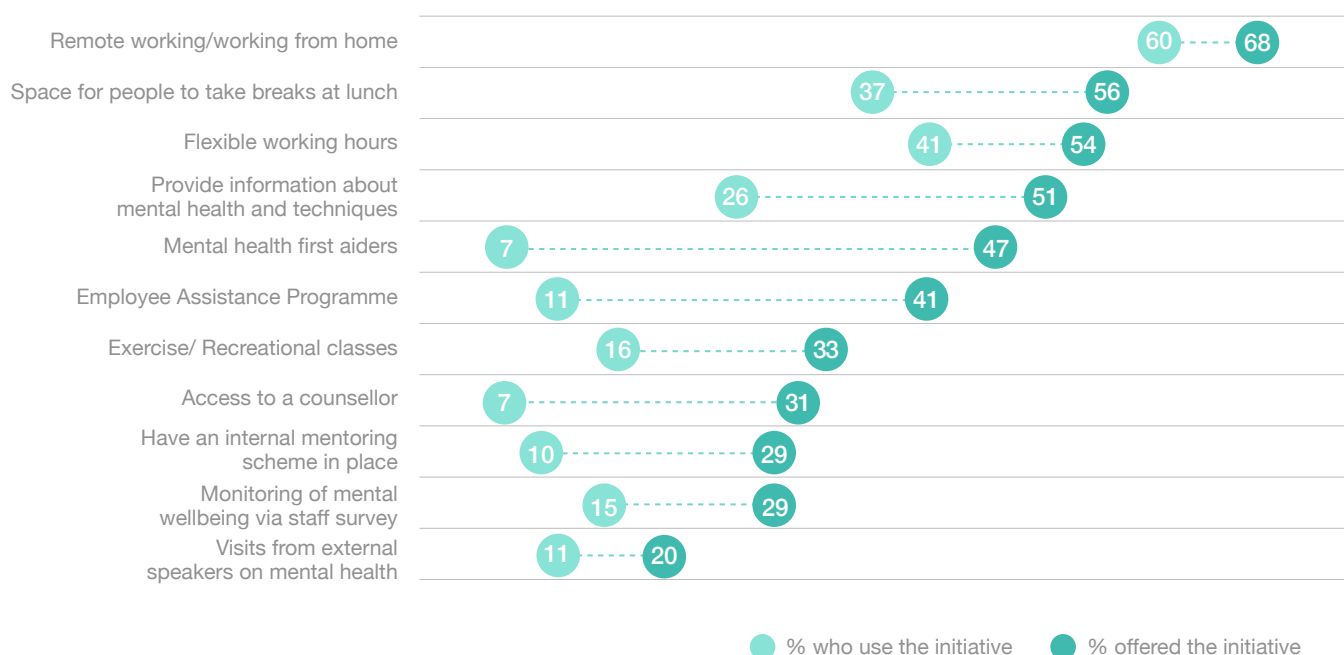


Initiatives that are working

Following our report from last year, there has been a slight increase in the initiatives offered in workplaces and the benefits are clear. Two thirds (68%) of workplaces offer remote working, 51% provide information about mental health and techniques to support mental health (vs 36% last year) and 47% offer a mental health first aider (vs 27% last year).

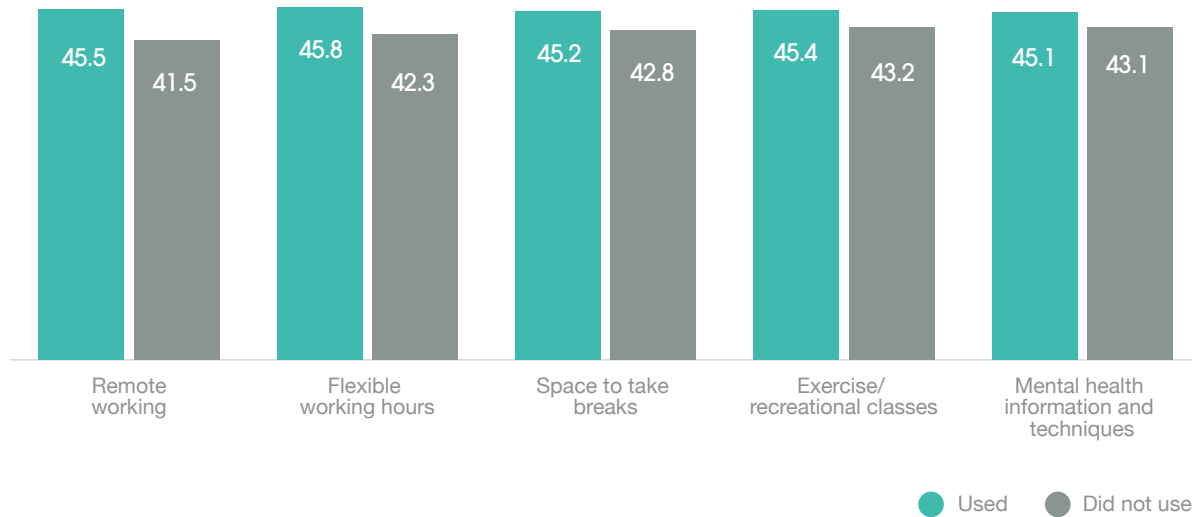
However, usage is low amongst a number of these initiatives, as shown in the chart below. Whilst 47% of PR professionals have access to a mental health first aider at their company, only 7% of PR professionals have actually spoken to one.

Initiatives offered to PR professionals



Furthermore, usage of a number of these initiatives has shown to be a benefit to mental wellbeing, both at a self-reported level and as measured by WEMWBS. Remote working is one of those initiatives – those who used remote working have far higher mental wellbeing scores as measured by the WEMWBS, and 83% of users said it improved their mental wellbeing. Flexible working hours is another initiative that has demonstrable effects on employee mental wellbeing – as well as WEMWBS scores being far higher, 87% of users reported that it improved their mental wellbeing. And the same is true for users of mental wellbeing information and techniques and exercise/ recreational classes; WEMWBS scores are higher and users reported this improving their mental wellbeing (79% and 88% respectively).

Wellbeing scores (WEMWBS) of those who used each initiative, versus those who did not

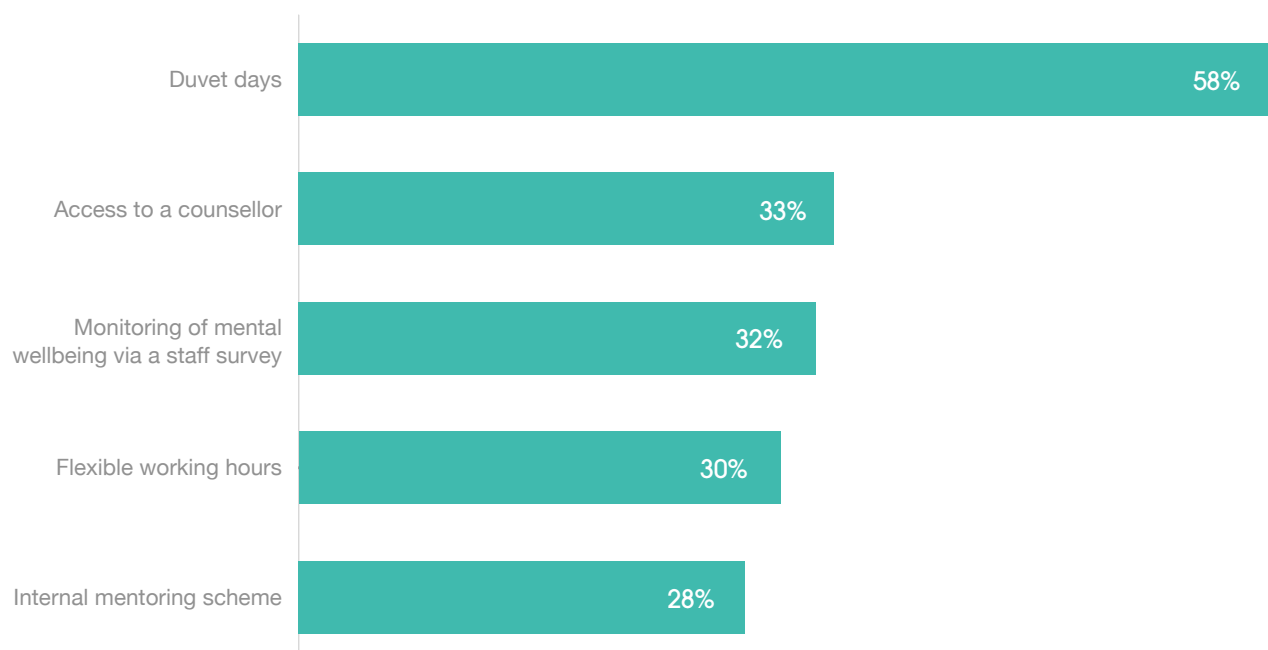


Room for more

There is a demand from employees for companies to offer more initiatives to support wellbeing. Three fifths (58%) say they would like duvet/ mental health days (only 2% are offered this currently) and 33% would like access to a counsellor (31% are currently offered this) and 32% monitoring of mental wellbeing via a staff survey (15% are currently offered this). We recommend offering a variety of initiatives to provide suitable support for all employees, as something that may help one individual's mental wellbeing may not be so helpful for another.



Initiatives employees would like to see their workplace introduce



Culture change and openness is key to ensuring the success of wellbeing initiatives

Introducing initiatives is a really important step in improving the mental wellbeing of employees, but employers must also be making a concerted effort to change the underlying culture around mental health in the company. Having initiatives in

place without encouraging an open culture about mental health can risk employees seeing the initiatives as a token or tick-box exercise. An individual and personal approach of listening to and checking in with team members is key to fostering this culture of openness about mental wellbeing.





“We have a counselling scheme but it’s done via a call centre which feels impersonal. I think improving the work environment and creating a more open culture of speaking about mental health or having someone in the office who’s always able to chat about these issues face-to-face (post COVID).”

“I believe mental wellbeing is being paid lip service to particularly within our team. We are signposted to all the right channels but with no real understanding or empathy towards how we are feeling and what might have caused it.”

3. LEARN FROM THE LOCKDOWN

One of the major responses to the pandemic was the lockdown which required employees to work from home if possible. This was quite some change for most of the PR industry, as only 47% of PR professionals worked from home before the coronavirus outbreak – 6% full time, 41% some of the time.

It's no surprise then that 100% of employees in the industry are currently working from home. Our findings show that there have been huge benefits from doing so and employees want to see some changes remain. However, the picture has not been perfect, with a considerable number finding the experience a challenge. As we come out of lockdown, employers should try to learn from the experience and maintain practices that have been beneficial to employees. They must also recognise that the experience of the crisis varies from person to person – approaching the return to work should put the individual first.

Working from home has many benefits

Overall, many PR professions have felt positive about this increase in working from home. With one of the main benefits being the removal of the stressful commute - 66% say not having to commute has improved their mental health and 55% say they are more relaxed. Half (51%) also reported that their work-life balance is better now that they are working from home.

But not everything has been easy...

However, working from home does have its challenges and has negatively impacted some groups more than others. As the figures below show, in some cases there is a significant number who are finding aspects of working from home during the lockdown a challenge. Almost two thirds of PR professionals find it hard to build in time to go outside during the work day, 58% struggle to draw boundaries between work and rest and half (51%) are working longer hours now they are working from home.

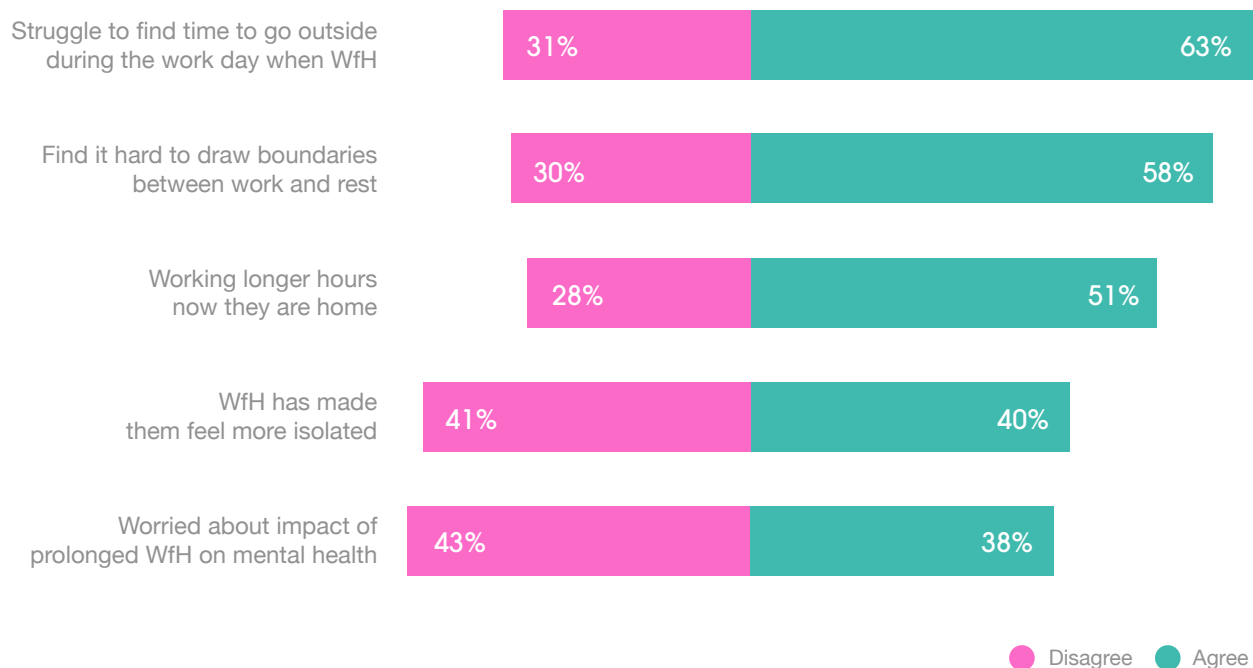




"I feel like I am living in my office rather than working from home, and I struggle to stop working at the end of the day; there is always something more to be done. Similarly, I struggle to get outside for exercise because of work pressures"

Senior Level, 35-49

Experiences of Working from Home



So, although there are some clear benefits to working from home, like feeling more relaxed and being free from the bad parts of commuting, there are also downsides, notably challenges with separating work and rest. Indeed, there is some division of the effects of working from home during lockdown; whilst 40% say it has improved their mental wellbeing, 42% say the opposite. Younger PR professionals are most likely to have felt this negative impact of working from home – 45% of those under 35 said that WfH has decreased their mental wellbeing, versus 36% of those aged 50+.

Those who have found it negatively affected their mental health cited a number of pressures, many mentioned the challenge of switching off, loneliness, missing socialising with colleagues and the stresses of looking after small children:

"It's the feeling of isolation. I have never opted to work from home. Whilst I have adapted, I am not sure I want to do another few months of it.... It's hard being in one room for work, relaxing, sleeping and other activities. It is really hard to create those boundaries when working at home in a one bed flat."

"I miss the support of my colleagues and the office banter/humour. I am juggling looking after a small child with work, which is extremely stressful."

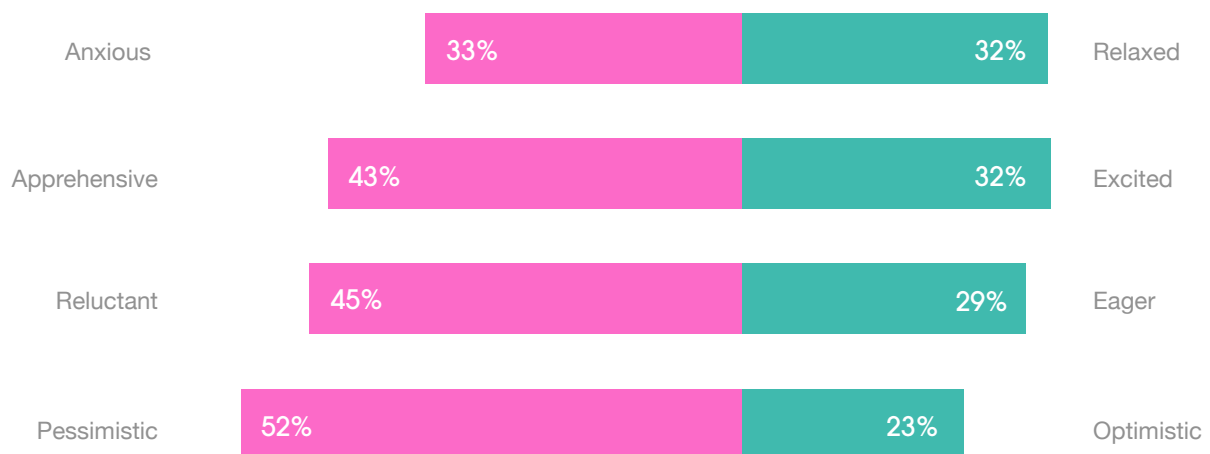
“Enjoying working from home generally, and would like to continue to do so a few days a week. But prolonged WFH has made me feel a bit isolated. Also miss the energy you get from seeing other people.”

Nonetheless, an overwhelming 96% want to continue working from in some capacity when lockdown is over, with most wanting to work from home a few days a week (51%).

Returning to office life

When it comes to returning to the office, there is a mixed response in terms of how PR professionals feel about this, but overall feelings are more negative than positive, as shown by the following chart.

Feeling about returning to the office



The main concerns that people have about returning to the office are about busy commutes (56%), logistics of socially distancing desks (52%), and losing the free time gain whilst working from home (51%). These are factors that employers will need to take into account when planning a return to the office.



LOOKING AHEAD...

As we have seen, the last twelve months have been a challenge for the industry, especially in the light of Covid-19. Though, attitudes are beginning to change for the better and employees who have opened up about their mental health have seen positive results. However, whilst things are moving in the right direction there is still lots of work to do to until we reach a place where mental wellbeing is treated the same way we treat physical wellbeing.

Determining whether the next twelve months will see these positive trends continue is made all the more difficult by the ongoing pandemic. There are numerous ways in which the crisis has and will impact workers, from the added anxiety of the virus itself to the potential for future job losses.

The impact of coronavirus on the company was one of the key causes of stress at work (44%).

Employers must strongly consider how this is affecting the health and wellbeing of their employees, and keep an open dialogue about the impact of coronavirus to help ease some of this stress.

One of the more positive aspects to come from the pandemic is the huge shift in our working practises, and many employees are enjoying the benefits this has brought to their day-to-day living and mental wellbeing.

In any difficulty there is also opportunity. The opportunity here is to take this crisis to re-examine our working culture and make it better for all of us. As the long-term implications of the pandemic have yet to be felt, employers should make it a point to cultivate an environment of openness, long after the pandemic is over.



AUTHORS



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Sophie is passionate about mental health and holds a BA Hons in Experimental Psychology from the University of Oxford. She developed Opinionium's workplace mental wellbeing audit and heads up Opinionium's mental health research team. Sophie is also Head of Wellbeing internally at Opinionium, introducing workplace initiatives to support employee mental wellbeing. 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. She is heavily involved in the brand and comms space, charity sector and social research.

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Isobel Hunt

With a BA (Hons) in Psychology, Isobel joined Opinionium in June last year and works within the PR sector running a mix of quick-turnaround and large international projects across a range of sectors. Isobel is also involved in the wellbeing team, running lunchtime walks and part of the training and welcome teams at Opinionium supporting new joiners.

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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 PRCA

The Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) is the world's largest professional PR body.

We represent more than 35,000 PR professionals in 70 countries worldwide. With offices in London, Singapore, Dubai, and Buenos Aires, we are a global advocate for excellence in public relations.

Our mission is to create a more professional, ethical, and prosperous PR industry. We champion - and enforce - professional standards in the UK and overseas through our Professional Charter and Code of Conduct. The Code compels members to adhere to the highest standards of ethical practice.

We deliver exceptional training, authoritative industry data, and global networking and development opportunities. We also manage the International Communications Consultancy Organisation (ICCO), the umbrella body for 41 PR associations and 3,000 agencies across the world, and LG Comms – the UK's national body for authorities raising standards of local government communication.

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

