



Continuing the Conversation: Mental Wellbeing in the US Insights Sector 2021



FOREWORDS

With all that has happened in the world in the past year, it's no wonder that the number of insights professionals who have experienced exhaustion or burnout has spiked, from 48% in 2020 to 58% in 2021. The rates of feeling low, depressed, and anxious are all trending in the wrong direction too. Though mental health issues are on the rise in our industry, we are just as resistant as last year to taking time off to tend to our mental health, and fewer of us are telling anyone at work about our struggles—though both actions have proven to have positive outcomes.

This reluctance to discuss our mental wellbeing at work may be creating a disconnect—where employers continue to view it as stable while, in fact, it is steadily worsening. What's more, employees are increasingly worried that discussing mental health at work will jeopardize their careers. Thus, there is a clear need for leaders in the insights industry to model taking care of and talking about their mental health at work to change the culture around this and encourage employees to seek the support they need in these trying times.

Our research reveals that excessive workloads are a top culprit for stress and the main reason employees don't feel they can take time off to care for their mental health—creating a vicious cycle.

If employers want to prove that they take the mental health and wellbeing of their employees seriously, managing their team's capacity and workload should be the priority.

We are so delighted to be partnering with the Insights Association for the second year in a row to audit our industry in the US. This mental wellbeing audit surveyed hundreds of Insights Association members working in research—spanning agency, in-house teams, suppliers, and freelance. We are extremely proud to be able to share this report with you, which we hope will inspire insights teams across the US to take small steps towards improving mental wellbeing in their organizations.

With all the challenges of the past year, addressing mental wellbeing at work may seem like a mammoth task, but it's a journey. As researchers, we believe that tracking the scope of the problem is the first step to tackling it.

We invite you to join us in using this research to kick start the conversation in your workplace.

Giulia Prati – VP, US Research, Opinium

The light at the end of our pandemic tunnel dimmed this year, so it's no surprise to see that our industry colleagues experienced higher levels of exhaustion and burnout – a 10% YOY increase, according to our survey. That is concerning. While we'd like to exclaim, "Help is on the way!" for those reporting incessant deadline stress and overwork, a very tight job market makes such reassurances impossible for many companies in our industry.

Such an environment commands creative and compassionate leadership. We must make permanent the best outcomes of the pandemic-transformed workplace – the flexibility to spend more time at home and with family, while pushing back on the uneasy feeling that we're never off the clock when our inbox is always at arm's length (55% of respondents to our survey said they have difficulty drawing work/rest boundaries).

For the most part, we are walking the walk – companies have been good about providing mental wellness programs (93%!); some are better than others at communicating their availability and making employees truly feel they are an option. Yet there remains an immense barrier between suffering employees and the help they need to get better. That's because scaling that obstacle is a scary proposition for them. Admitting you have a problem and need help; not wanting to let down colleagues and clients; feeling that you are putting your career at risk – concern that telling a colleague about their mental health struggles would jeopardize their career jumped 14% from 2020 to 2021!

We all need to make a concerted effort to reassure against these fears. Taking the steps needed to get help should not feel perilous to one's career. Because the alternative is far more dangerous.

I'm going to borrow a quote cited by my friend James Pickles on our recent Town Hall in which we highlighted the findings of this report and where James shared his personal journey of mental breakdown and recovery. James went back a century to dust off the wise words of merchant and politician John Wanamaker: "If you don't make time for your wellness, you may be forced to make time for your illness."

Take the time to push back from your hectic pace, seek help if you need it, reach out to colleagues if you have a concern about their mental wellness – or even if you don't. You are not alone.

I encourage everyone to [listen to our Town Hall](#) to hear James' story and the sage advice he and his fellow panelists imparted.

Meanwhile, as you read this report, think of ways to enact change in your life and in your company to help move these data points in a better direction.

Melanie Courtright, CEO, Insights Association

INTRODUCTION

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 recognized 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 organizations understand the mental health of their employees and, in turn, take steps to help them. We have once again partnered with the Insights Association to survey 258 research and insights professionals through their network, with the aim to understand the mental wellbeing of those working in the industry and the impact of the pandemic, and changes in reported wellbeing over time.

Throughout the report, we compare to last year's survey of US research and insights professionals, to understand changes over time, as well as our normative database of national US workers, to understand how the industry fares in comparison to others.



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 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. Furthermore, scores can be tracked over time, allowing organizations and society at large to understand factors that impact mental wellbeing.



**Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS) © NHS Health Scotland, University of Warwick and University of Edinburgh, 2006, all rights reserved.

KEY STATISTICS

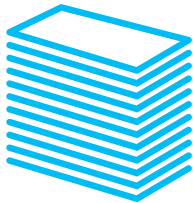
In the past 12 months, **87%** of research professionals experienced poor mental health to some degree



67%

who took time off for mental health found it improved the quality of their work

57%



of those who didn't take time off for their mental wellbeing, felt they had too much work to do



42%

felt their employers' response to social issues (e.g. the pandemic, political unrest, etc.) had a positive impact on the workplace environment

9/10

researchers are offered workplace initiatives to support their mental wellbeing (93%)



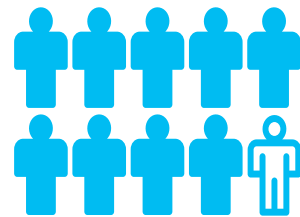
55%

Access to remote working is up from 73% to 83% for research professionals

The top concern about returning to the office is losing free time gained WfH

78%

agree that the workplace has a role to play in mental wellbeing



Nine in ten research professionals have felt supported by their employer over the course of the pandemic (90%)



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Recommendations

The research provided us with a wealth of data to analyze and deciding which findings to focus on was no easy task, but we distilled the insights down to 5 key recommendations for senior leaders in the research and insights industry:

1

Enable employees to take action to look after their mental health by managing workload

2

Introduce structures and processes to better support employee mental health and manage workplace stress

3

Reassure employees during the heightened political and social climate

4

Cultivate an accepting culture around mental health as well as introducing wellbeing initiatives

5

Incorporate flexibility and personalization into working practices as we emerge from the pandemic



1. ENABLE EMPLOYEES TO TAKE ACTION TO LOOK AFTER THEIR MENTAL HEALTH BY MANAGING WORKLOAD

Compared to last year, research professionals have experienced poor mental health at higher rates, especially when it comes to exhaustion and burnout. Our data points to a few key reasons for this. This year, we witnessed an increase in workload that put stress on employees. In addition, poor mental health has disproportionately affected women research professionals. Despite an increase in workload and decline in mental wellbeing, the percentage of research professionals taking time off for this has remained stagnant. It's positive that most insight companies have mental wellbeing policies in place, but we need to get to a point where research professionals are taking action for their mental health.

WEMWBS scores remain stable year on year

In 2021, the average WEMWBS score for US research professionals was 48, which is consistent with last year's score of 47.7. Although overall wellbeing has remained relatively stable, 2021 has proved a challenging year for research professionals' mental health.



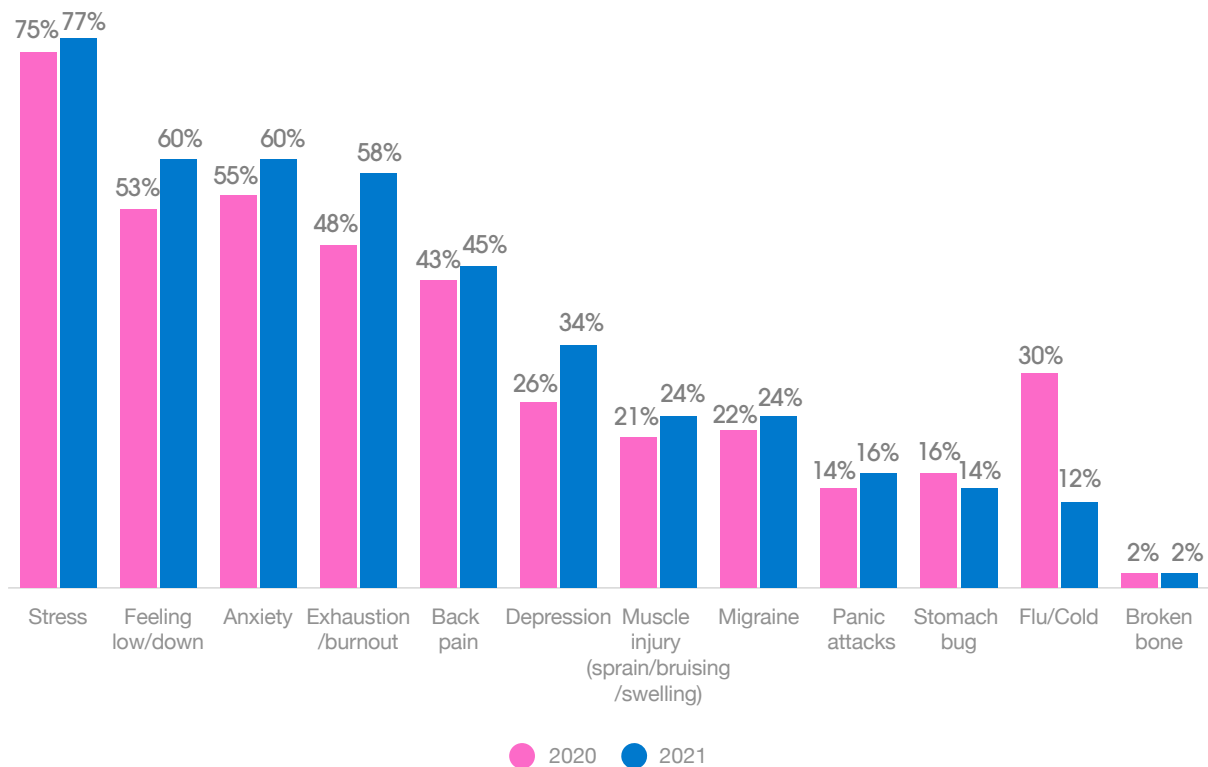
Nearly nine in ten research professionals experienced poor mental health in 2021

Struggling with mental health is widespread among US research professionals. In the last twelve months, nearly nine in ten (87%) have experienced poor mental health to some degree. This is a 4 percentage point increase, where 83% of those in the research community experienced poor mental health.

Research professionals are experiencing exhaustion and burnout, depression, feeling low/down, and anxiety at higher rates. Worryingly, the biggest jump was in exhaustion and burnout, where 58% experienced this in 2021, compared to 48% of research professionals in 2020. Moreover, over three quarters (77%) say exhaustion and burnout is negatively impacting their work.

The full breakdown is shown in the following chart.

Thinking about the last twelve months, have you experienced any of the following?



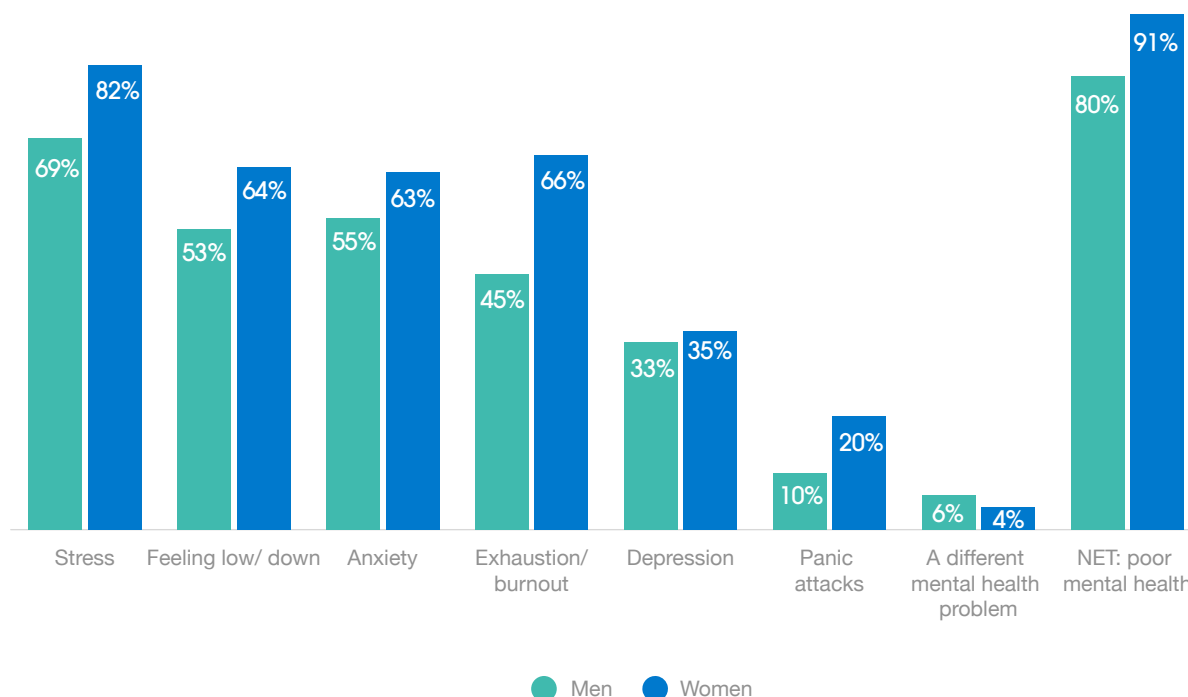
Around three fourths (72%) of research professionals who experienced poor mental health say it negatively impacted their work, and just under half (48%) say the same for physical health issues. This is a continuation of a trend our research underscored in 2020 – poor mental health appears to negatively impact an individual's work more than poor physical health.

Women more susceptible to poor mental health than men

When it comes to mental health in the research community, women experience certain mental health issues more than men. Just over eight in ten women (82%) experience stress, compared to seven in ten men (69%). Women are also more likely to experience burnout, with two thirds of women (66%) experiencing this and under half of men (45%).

This echoes a similar trend we witnessed in 2020. Over three quarters of women (78%) experienced stress, compared to seven in ten men (68%). And over half of women (53%) experienced burnout, compared to only 37% of men.

Thinking about the last twelve months, have you experienced any of the following?

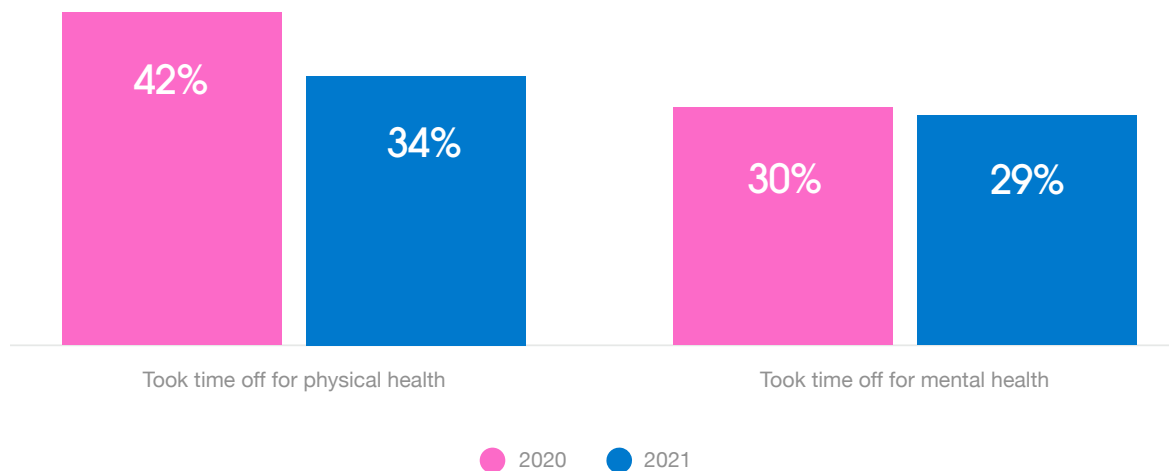


This gender disparity is perhaps a testament to how women have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic – for many women, work-life balance ceased to exist, and the pandemic forced them to become full-time moms *and* full-time employees.

While mental health declined, taking time off remained stagnant

Our research underscores a common stigma among the research community and general US workforce: mental health is not a “valid” enough reason to take time off. Despite poor mental health having a greater negative impact on an individual’s work than poor physical health, research professionals are less likely to take necessary time off to reset and recover. Although there was a 5 percentage point increase among research professionals struggling with their mental health compared to last year, we see no increase in amount of time taken off for mental wellbeing. Less than one in three research professionals (29%) took time off for their mental wellbeing in 2021, which is about the same percentage that took time off for mental health the year before (30%).

Taking time off work for physical and mental health issues, year over year change



And this is despite time off improving quality of work and wellbeing

When research professionals do take time off to reset (even just a day or two) they come back with improved wellbeing and performance in the workplace. Among those who took time off for their mental health, two thirds agree that it improved the quality of their work and that they returned feeling much better than before (67% and 64%, respectively).

However, when research professionals do take time off, the majority will not tell their employer the truth about needing time off for mental health. Only one third of research professionals (33%) told their employer the exact reason they needed time off, which is a 10 percent decrease from last year (43%). Instead, nearly half of research professionals (47%) will tell their employer a different reason and one fifth (22%) will default to a physical illness.



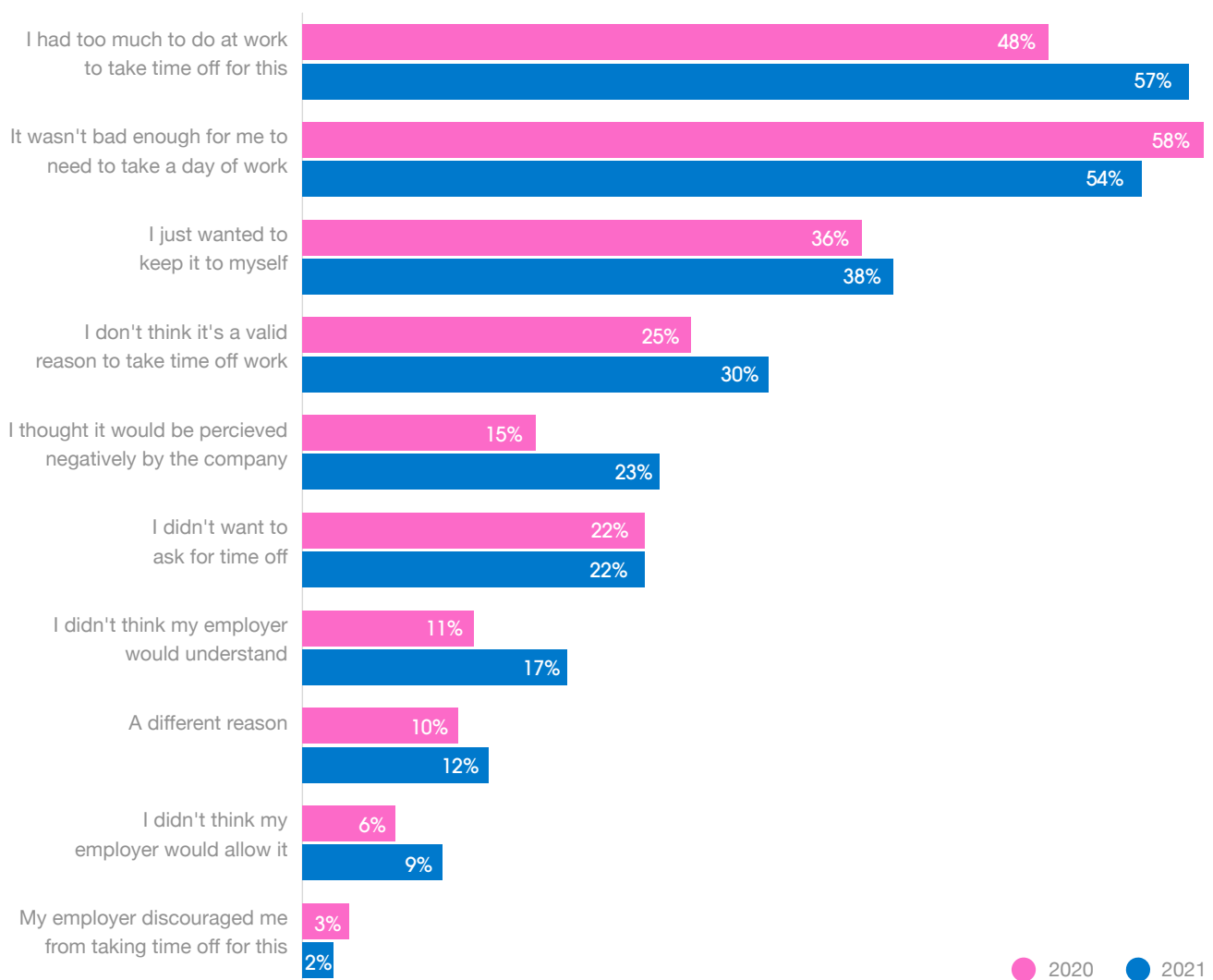
So why aren't research professionals taking time off for their mental health when they are struggling?

Heavy workload is the top reason for not taking time off for mental health

Nearly three fifths (57%) feel they have too much to do to take time off their mental health. In 2020, nearly half cited this as reason for not taking time off for mental health (48%), highlighting how workload has increased this year.



Why didn't you take time off for your mental wellbeing? Year over year change



2. INTRODUCE STRUCTURES TO BETTER SUPPORT EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH AND MANAGE WORKPLACE STRESS

Overall, we found that common sources of stress in the workplace, like deadlines and demands, have become even more stressful this year. Although these things will always be sources of stress in the workplace, managing them is key. However, when it comes to mental wellbeing, employees felt significantly less supported by their employers this year—making managing these common stressors increasingly difficult. Where employers fell short, research professionals found themselves confiding in their colleagues, which positively impacted the individual struggling. Yet, employees are unsure how they can support each other. A key takeaway for insight companies is to put structures in place so your employees can effectively support each other and feel good about discussing their mental wellbeing in the workplace.

Common stressors have become more stressful

When asked how stressful they found their job, US research professionals gave an average score of 6.3. This is a slight increase from 2020, where the average was 6.1. Digging deeper into what causes research professionals stress at work it looks like common sources of stress have become even more stressful this year.

Over half (53%) stated that impending deadlines/targets cause stress – making this the top source for stress in the workplace, vs. 48% last year. This is closely followed by a workload that is too much to handle (52% vs. 47% last year). Other sources of stress include demands from clients (39% vs. 35% last year), risk involved with getting a project wrong (37% vs. 35% last year), and poor work-life balance (36% vs. 34% last year).

One stark difference between this year and last is that the impact of coronavirus on the company is no longer a top source of stress. In 2020, over two fifths of researchers (45%) felt the pandemic was among a top source of stress in their work life. This has dropped significantly in 2021 (22%), and it is no longer among the top sources of stress.

Research professionals felt less supported by their employers in 2021

In 2021, nearly two in five research professionals (39%) believe their employer isn't doing enough to support employees struggling with their mental health. This is up 11 percentage points from last year (28%). Moreover, half (53%) felt their current workplace takes the mental health and wellbeing of its employees seriously, which is a 9 percentage point fall from last year (62%).

Research professionals remain strong in their opinion that the workplace has a role to play in mental health of employees. Over three quarters (78%) agree that the workplace has a role to play in looking after the mental wellbeing of its employees, a slight increase from last year (75%). Although research companies can be doing more to prioritize mental health, over half (57%) agree that they would feel supported at work if they struggled with a mental health issue, which is slightly lower than last year (60%)



“My colleagues were a sounding board and source of solidarity”

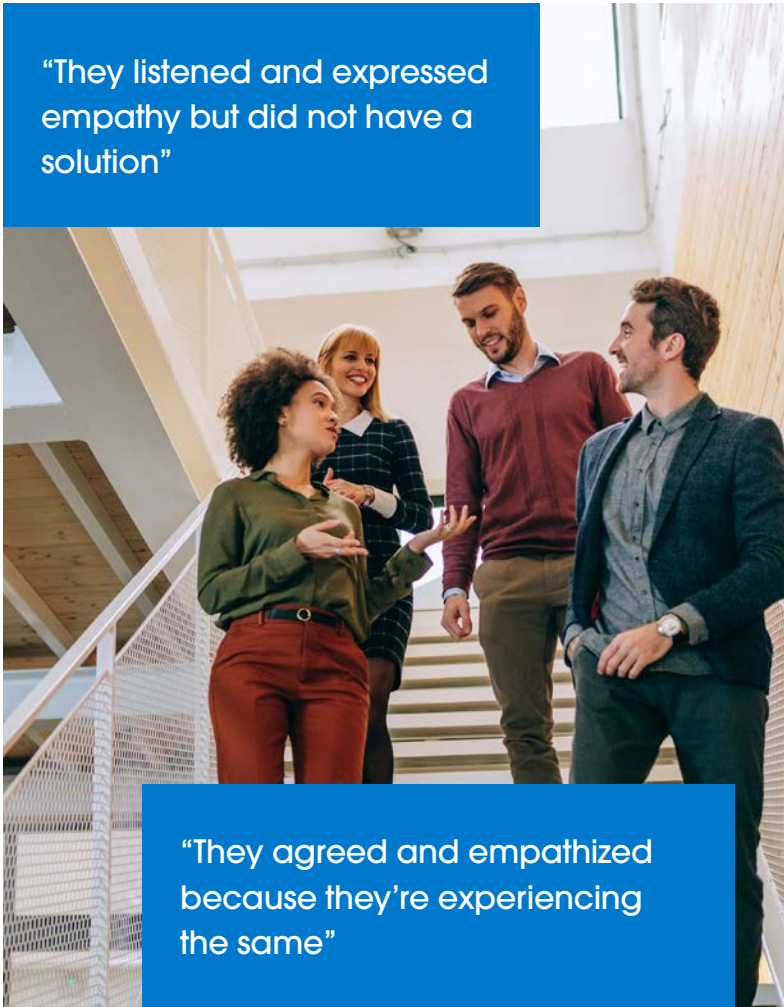
Most research professionals confide in their colleagues about poor mental health

Rather than turning directly to their employer, members of the research community feel more comfortable confiding in their colleagues. Nearly three quarters (72%) feel their colleagues would be supportive when struggling with mental health, which is up from last year (67%).

In 2021, just over half of research professionals (55%) struggling with their mental health have talked with someone at work about it, while two fifths (42%) have not. These are comparable figures to last year, where 58% talked to someone at work about their mental health and 40% did not.

Colleagues remained as the top person to turn to in the workplace when struggling with mental health. If they do talk to someone in the workplace, most research professionals will turn to their colleagues about their mental health struggles (58%), slightly more than last year (56%). Following colleagues, nearly three in ten (27%) opened up about their mental health struggles to their line manager, similar to 2020 (25%). And just over one in ten turned to their CEO (13%), again similar to last year (13%).

Opening up about mental health in the workplace is more often than not a positive experience. Three quarters (76%) said whoever they talked to was understanding and supportive, only 4% said it made them feel they could no longer come to work, 3% said it made them feel embarrassed and 2% said the person they confided in felt embarrassed or awkward. However, it can also feel like dead-end: a quarter (25%) acknowledge the person they spoke to didn't know the best way to support them. This shines light on an opportunity for companies to put tangible next steps in place and talk to their employees about having conversations about mental health.




"They listened and expressed empathy but did not have a solution"

"They agreed and empathized because they're experiencing the same"

More research professionals worry that opening up about mental health will jeopardize their career

While most research professionals (55%) who don't open up about their mental health in the workplace attribute this to not feeling it's necessary, over one third (36%) kept it to themselves because they felt it would jeopardize their career. Worryingly, these feelings around opening up about mental health problems negatively impacting one's career increased since last year (22% in 2020).



"My employer goes above and beyond to offer wellness benefits but that doesn't change the serious time pressure and stress from working long hours through COVID with kids at home, etc."

"It's easy to say that "Oh I can't come to work today cause I have a migraine" but if we replace migraine with anxiety or depression, I think there will be some people who will just say that you're just being lazy or it's not real just because it's not easily visible when you're dealing with a mental illness."

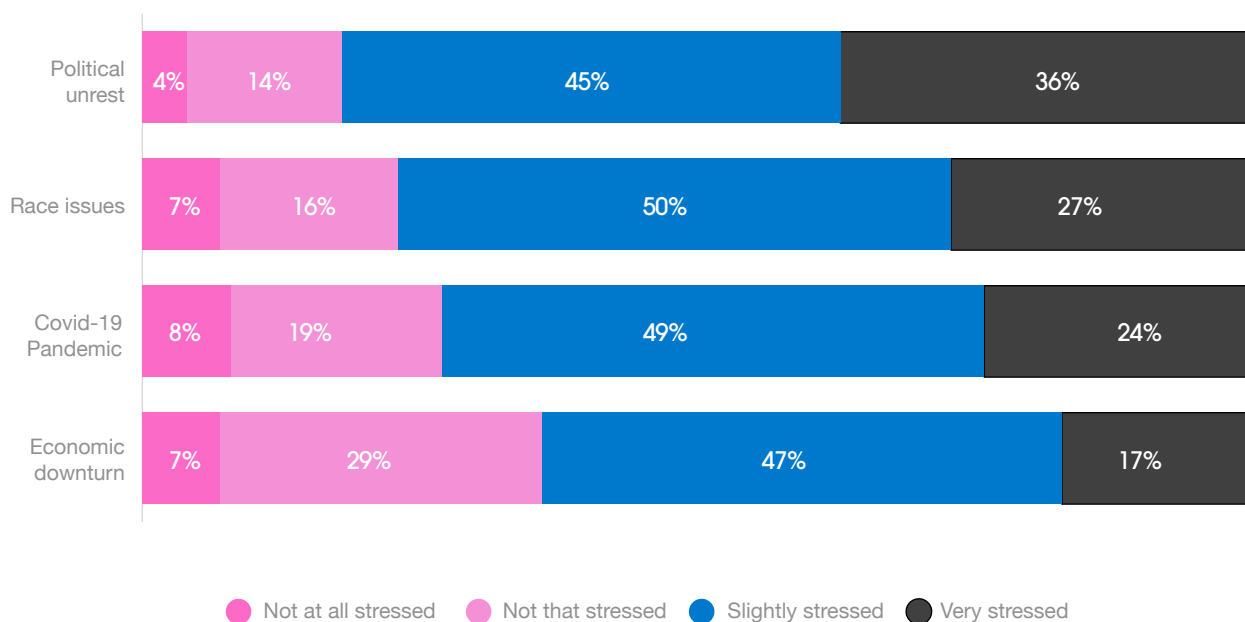
3. REASSURE EMPLOYEES DURING THE HEIGHTENED POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CLIMATE

Looking beyond stress solely as a product of the workplace, we researched how political, social, and economic factors are affecting the research community. Our data reveals how political unrest, race issues, the pandemic, and economic uncertainty cause immense stress for employees. Although these issues exist outside of work, they still negatively impact individual on the job. This is especially true for younger employees, which is important to be cognizant of. Although insight companies can't solve the problems of the world, they can respond and reassure their employees. Overall, we see a net positive impact when employers address certain issues, a signal to insights companies to not shy away from taking a stand.

External factors, like social and political issues, are causing immense stress on employees

Eight in ten are stressed by political unrest (82%), over three fourths by race issues (77%), 73% by the pandemic, and 64% by the economic downturn. Nearly two fifths (36%) feel very stressed from political unrest.

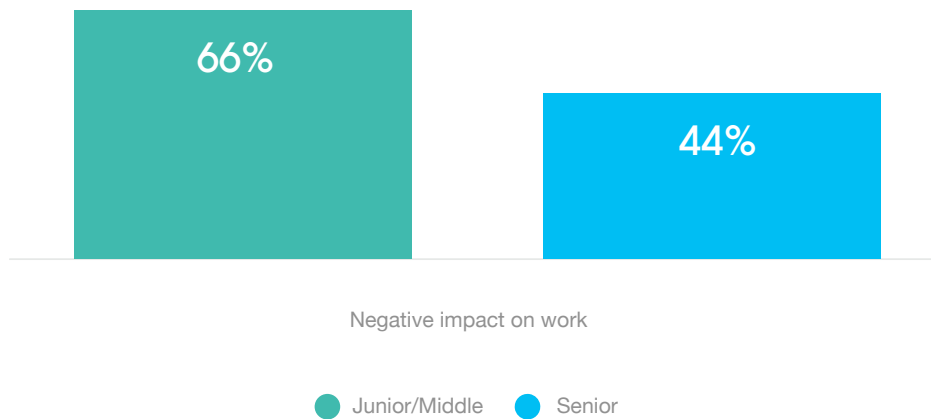
To what degree do you feel stressed about the following issues in the USA?



Younger employees are more likely to have stress from social issues impact their work

For younger generations, the lines between life and work are blurred and what's going on in the world affects their work. Overall, half of employees (53%) feel that stress created by social issues negatively impacts their work. This figure rises among junior to middle-level staff (66%) and dips among senior staff (44%).

To what extent do you feel that stress created by social issues negatively impacts you at work?



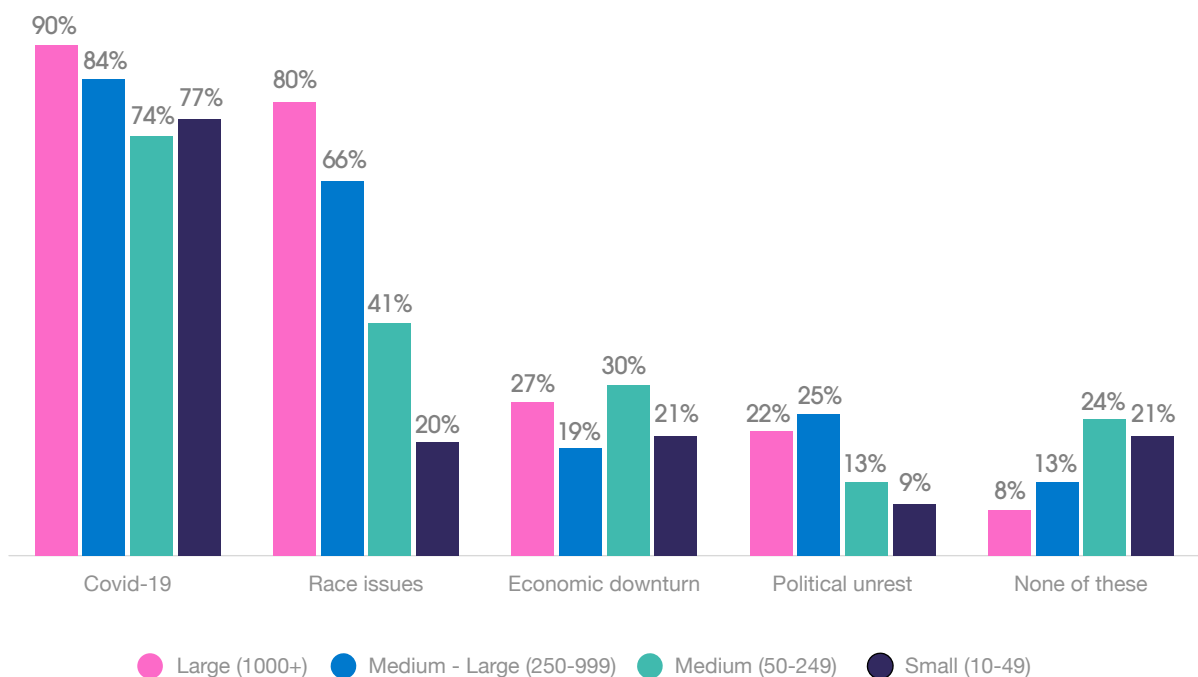
The pandemic is the most common issue addressed by employers

Just under three quarters of employers in the US research community (72%) have addressed the Covid-19 pandemic, making it the most addressed social issue in the workplace. Close to half (45%) addressed race issues, and a quarter (24%) addressed economic downturn. Over one in ten (14%) addressed political unrest, which is the social issue causing the most stress for employees (82%).

Large employers are more likely to address social issues in the workplace.

Nine in ten research professionals (90%) who work at large companies (e.g., 1000+ employees) say their employer addressed Covid-19, and eight in ten (80%) said they addressed race issues, close to three in ten (27%) addressed economic downturn, and one fifth (22%) addressed political unrest. These figures dip among small companies (e.g., 10-49 employees), where around three quarters (77%) addressed the pandemic, followed by race issues (20%), economic downturn (21%) and political unrest (9%). We often look towards larger businesses to lead the way, but it shouldn't depend on size of the business to address social issues that are causing stress in the workplace.

Has your employer done anything to respond to or address any of the following issues in your workplace?



Overall, addressing social issues in the workplace has a positive impact

Addressing social issues in the workplace often resonates with employees and has an overall positive affect on them. Two fifths (42%) felt that their employer's response had a positive impact on the workplace environment – only 12% disagree with this. Moreover, two fifths (42%) felt reassured by their employer addressing the issues and unrest that we're witnessed across the country this past year while only 12% disagree with this.

However appreciated, addressing social issues is not a solution to alleviating personal stress felt by employees. While a quarter (25%) said their employer addressing the issues and unrest made them feel less stressed, a similar proportion (23%) disagree with this and said it made no difference.



4. CULTIVATE AN ACCEPTING CULTURE AROUND MENTAL HEALTH AS WELL AS INTRODUCING INITIATIVES

This year we have seen an uplift in insight companies offering initiatives to their employees to support mental health and wellbeing. In particular, we see increasing amounts of employees receiving the opportunity to work remotely and flexibly which directly improves employee wellbeing. However, we see many initiatives are still underused – employers need to ensure they are communicating these clearly to ensure individuals can easily make use of these. Perhaps more importantly, there is much work to be done in creating a workplace where employees can open up about their mental wellbeing without fear of repercussions or judgements. The line doesn't stop at offering initiatives, all the benefits in the world cannot fix the ongoing industry wide problems of burn out and workload pressure. These must be at the forefront as the industry takes action to improve employee wellbeing.

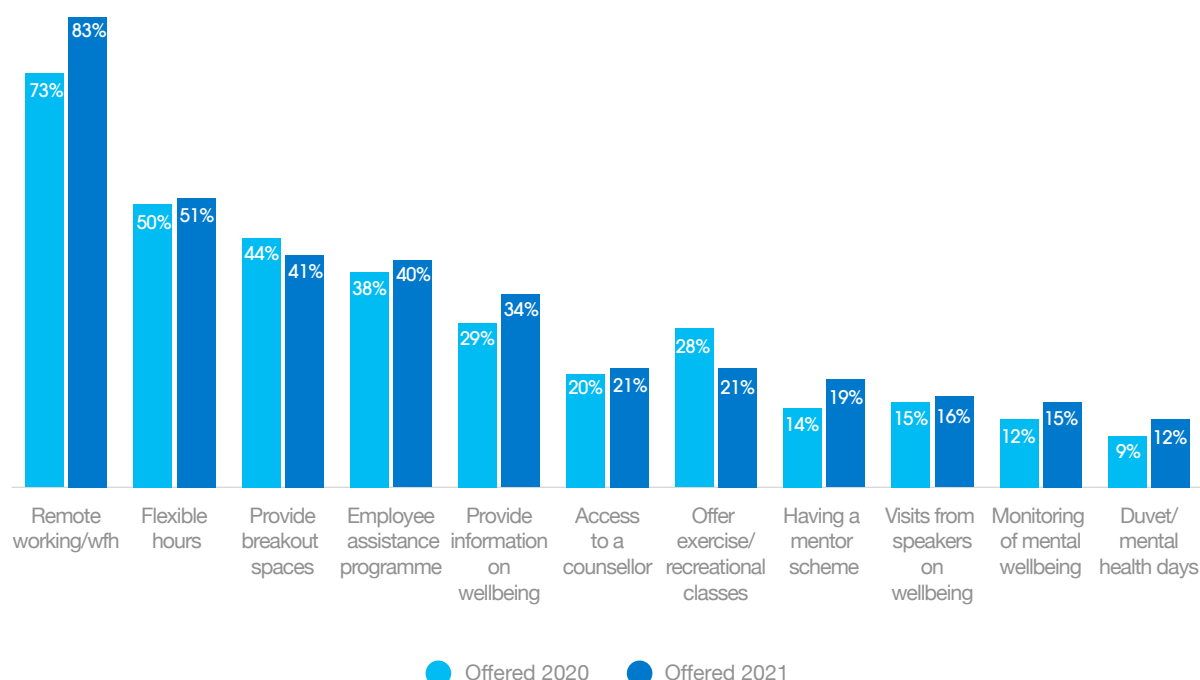
Offering workplace wellbeing initiatives positively impacts employee wellbeing

Across the insights industry over nine in ten employers are proactive in wellbeing support and offer initiatives to support employee mental health (93%). This is up from last years (90%) and continues to track well above the workforce average within the US (77%). Providing workplace wellbeing initiatives positively correlates with employee wellness. Our research found that research professionals who are offered wellbeing initiatives of any kind have higher wellbeing scores (as measured by WEMWBS) than those who did not receive any initiatives from their employer (47.8 offered any initiative, 45.9 not offered any initiatives). This indicates that workplace cultures that prioritize mental wellbeing and taking action are key, as those who are offered initiatives, have better scores than those who are not offered anything by their employer (45.9).



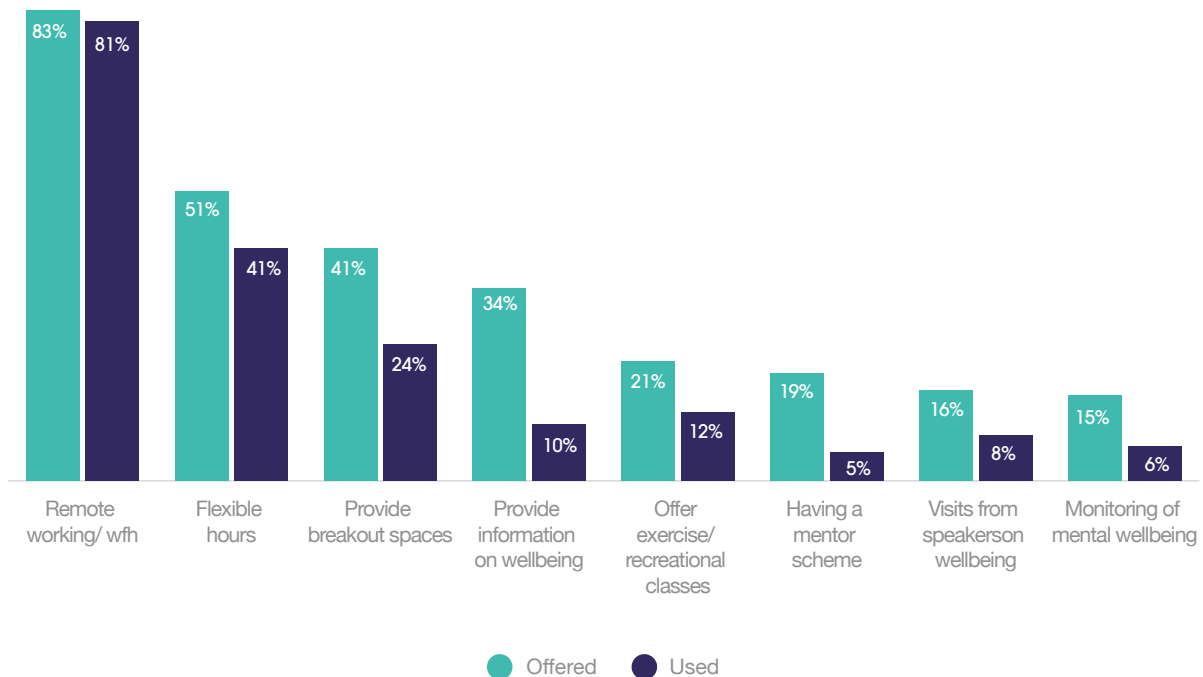
There are some notable changes in initiatives being offered to researchers in 2021 compared to 2020 as well, with the option to work remotely being the most notable change, increasing by 10 percentage points from 73% up to 83% being the most notable change. The research industry is well ahead of the curve when it comes to remote working, as only 18% of US workers are offered this and this is in general decline from 2020 where 21% were offered remote working. However, when we look closely at workplace-centered initiatives, researchers are offered we see some small declines; having a dedicated breakout spaces is down from 44% in 2020 to 41% in 2021 and being offered

Offered wellbeing initiatives in 2020 and 2021



Taking advantage of workplace wellbeing initiatives is much higher among researchers than that of the US working population, with over nine in ten researchers using one or more of the initiatives offered (92%) vs the working population (67%). Among researchers, there is an interesting gender divide in usage, with men being less likely to use the initiatives offered to them (12% didn't use any initiatives vs 6% of women). This is a continuous trend from 2020, where we saw 22% of males not using any initiatives offered to them vs 10% of females. However it is good to see improvement compared to last year. This trend is less apparent amongst the US working population, highlighting may be an an issue specific to the research and insights sector (US workers overall: males 34% not using any initiatives and females 30%).

Wellbeing initiatives offers vs. initiatives used 2021



The most offered initiatives—remote working and flexible hours—are also the most used (81% and 41% respectively). These initiatives are also having a positive impact on employee wellbeing, with over three quarters stating remote working has improved their overall wellbeing (77%) and over eight in ten stating flexible hours have improved their wellbeing (85%).

However, some of the most impactful initiatives continue to be under-utilized by research professionals. As we saw last year only 2% accessed a counselor while 20% are offered, mirroring what we see this year (2% using while 21% were offered). The situation is similar with employee assistance programs (in 2020, 38% offered and 5% and, in 2021, 40% offered and 6% used).

Many researchers still desire a more open and honest culture in their workplace around mental wellbeing, and although it appears

underused, counselling is consistently mentioned as a wanted initiative. This may indicate that employers need to provide clear communication and signposting to these support services. Some employees are concerned about the repercussions of opening up about their wellbeing, and confidential external counselling service with dedicated people to talk to would provide some necessary reassurance.

"I think there should be more of an open door policy where you can speak to a more senior manager ...and outside counselling line would be helpful with no repercussions to your job"



“Ensure employees are clear on who they can reach out to, give them options other than just their managers (e.g. counsellors, HR contact, etc.)”

Action is needed to address the increasing issues of burnout and workload pressure

Even though positive gains have been made in terms of wellbeing initiatives offered, there are major issues with burnout and feeling over-worked. A cultural shift is needed to reduce over-working and burnout, which are historically prominent issues within the industry and negatively impact work for 77% of the 58% of research professionals who experienced this in 2021. Researchers are calling for their employers to take action to address the excessive workload

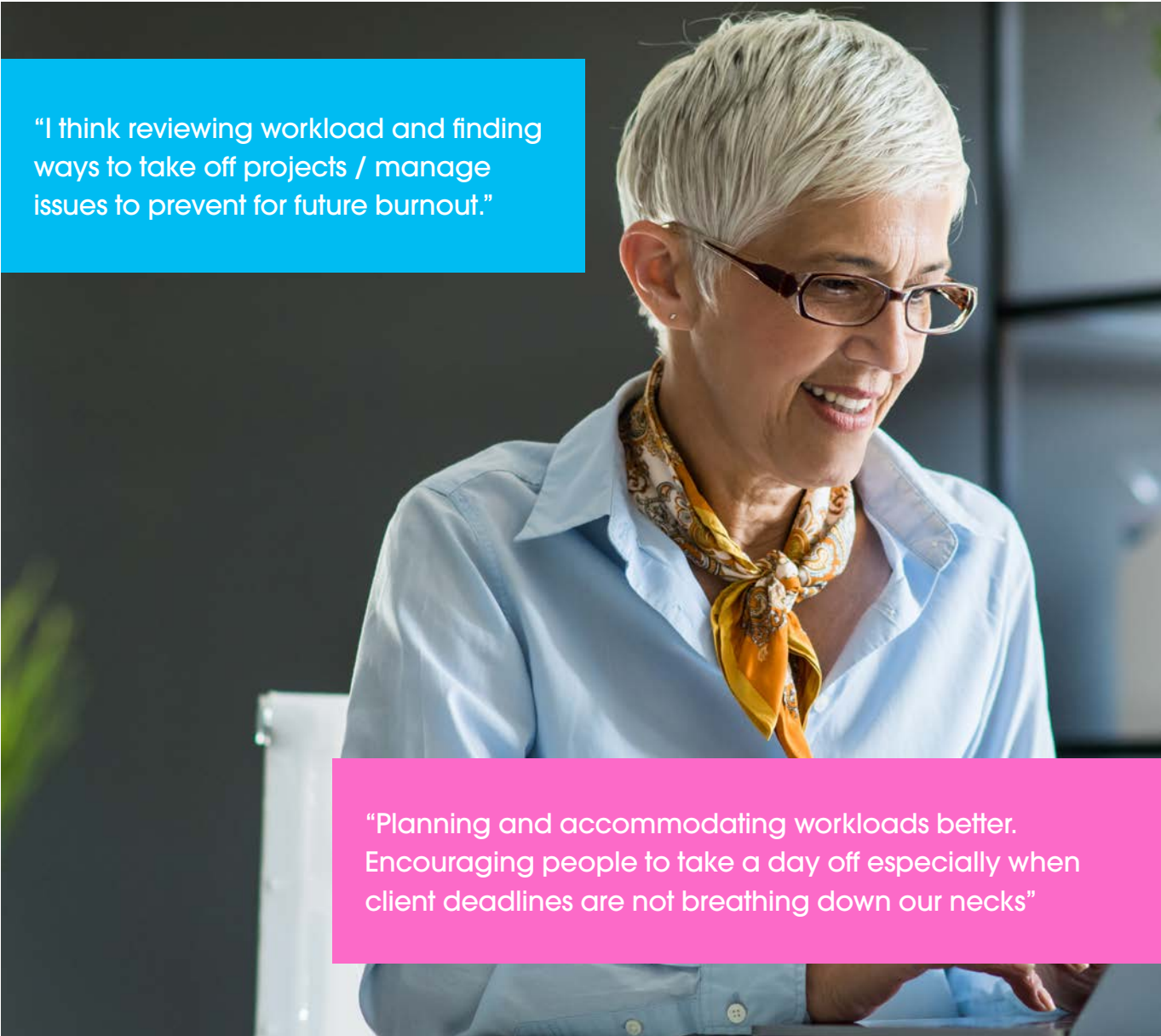
and the need for breathing space. Making the space for downtime is as important as carving out time for productive work. Employers cannot expect employees to expect employees to “constantly churn out work” and should consider “encouraging breaks and boundaries”.

“New programs and services are meaningless without changes in culture, modeled consistently by senior management”

“Give the team mental check in days after several days of high workload that clearly leads to burnout”

“Some additional PTO time would go a long way for my mental health. I have anxiety knowing that there is essentially no end in sight.”

Sometimes demanding times are part of the natural ebb and flow of the insight industry, however preventative measures are also something to take stock of as employees consider these key to improving their wellbeing at work:



"I think reviewing workload and finding ways to take off projects / manage issues to prevent for future burnout."

"Planning and accommodating workloads better. Encouraging people to take a day off especially when client deadlines are not breathing down our necks"

It is therefore somewhat unsurprising that the most in demand additional initiative research professionals would like to see introduced into their company is Duvet Days (39%) , up from 36% last year, and is much more sought after for women in research (47%) than men (21%), as well as those who are in middle to junior roles (56%) compared to their senior counterparts (24%). Furthermore, a quarter would like to see flexible working introduced into their companies (24%) and one in five would like to see monitoring of wellbeing (22%) perhaps as a way to monitor and manage workload effects and stop burnout in its tracks.

5. INCORPORATE FLEXIBILITY AND PERSONALISATION INTO WORKING PRACTISES AS WE EMERGE FROM THE PANDEMIC

As we saw last year, the research industry has done a good job at supporting its employees throughout the pandemic and has adapted to working from home well, with almost all employees having worked from home during the pandemic. And while most have reaped benefits from working from home, others have felt isolated or the lines between work and rest blur together as time goes on. The findings indicate a need to ease employees back into the workplace, and this is particularly true for those who have experienced certain mental health problems in the last 12 months. A unique hybrid and flexible working solution is a viable way to support employees back into the office space, especially as we see a shift in concerns about going back to the workplace move away from viral concerns to concerns around loss of personal time and time with family.

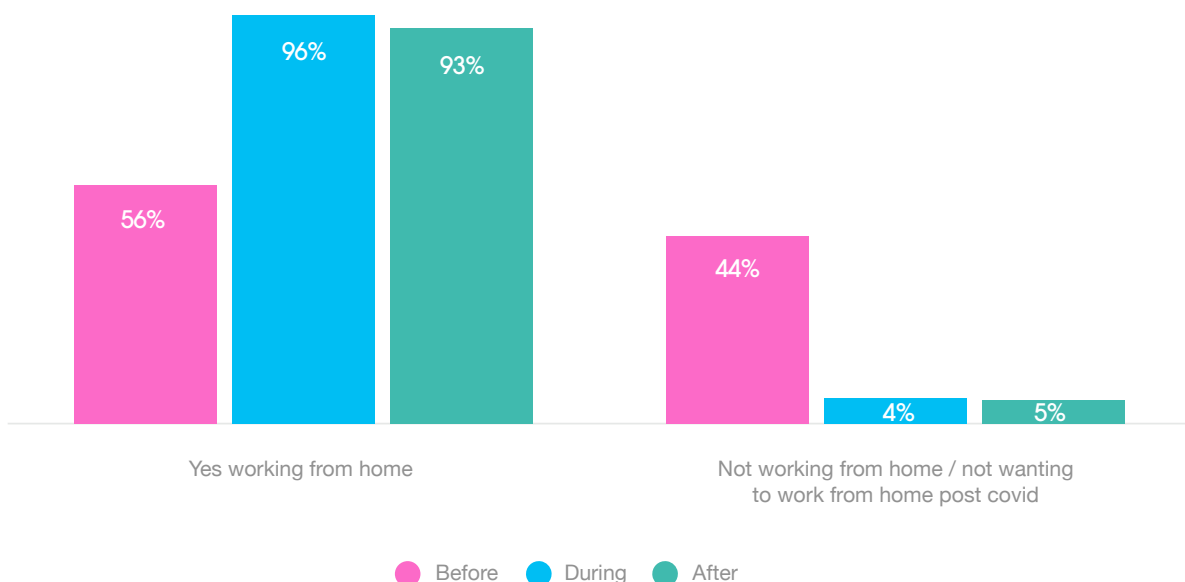
The research industry continues to handle the pandemic well and support employees though this turbulent time

In line with results from last year, research professionals in the US believe their organization has handled the pandemic well, as 75% rated their company as good (29%) or very good (47%). This is well above the benchmark for US workers where around two thirds rate their organization's handling of the pandemic as good (31%) or very good (36%). Furthermore, nine in ten research professionals have felt supported by their employer during this time (90%), with nearly three in five feeling very supported (58%). Handling the pandemic well and providing necessary support could have direct impact on employees wellbeing. We see a slight correlation between wellbeing scores (as measured by WEMWBS) and how individuals rate their organizations handling and support throughout the pandemic, with those who saw their organization as good at handling the pandemic scoring higher on average (49) than those who rated their organization's handling of the pandemic as poor (45.7). We see a similar trend when looking at how supportive employers have been, with individuals who had a supportive employer scoring 48 compared to those who had a non-supportive employer scoring (46.1).

Anxieties about returning to the office prevail, however these have shifted from concerns over hygiene to work-life balance.

We see the continuing trend of working from home during the pandemic this year (96%) which aligns with last year's figures (97%). Perhaps due to the nature of the insight industry this continues to be a substantial amount higher than the benchmark for the US working population (48%). The majority of research professionals want to continue to work from home post-pandemic (93%) which aligns with what we saw last year (94%). Slightly less researchers in smaller organizations (less than 50 employees) want to continue to work from home (89%), compared to those in medium and large organizations (50+ employees) (96%).

Working from home pre, during and hopes for after the pandemic



Overall, around half of US research professionals say working from home has increased their overall mental wellbeing (48%) which is up from last year (37%). Moreover, we see a continuation of growing positive experience of working from home having a positive impact on various aspects of wellbeing::

- ✓
- ✓ Feeling more relaxed whilst working from home (72%) this year, (64%) last year
- ✓ Not having to commute improved mental health (70%) this year, (64%) last year
- ✓ Better work life balance (57%) this year, (52%) last year

However, working from home has caused a decline in mental wellbeing for a quarter (26%) of research professionals. We can see working from home comes with its own set of difficulties, and in some aspects the lines between work and home are becoming more blurred as time goes on:

“Hard to maintain boundaries between work and personal life. Always feel on the clock and need to respond to emails after hours etc.”

- ✓ **Finding it hard to draw boundaries between work and rest (55%) this year, (46%) last year**
- ✓ **Struggling to build in time to go outside during the day (60%) this year, (55%) last year**
- ✓ **Working longer hours now that I am working from home (49%) this year, (46%) last year**

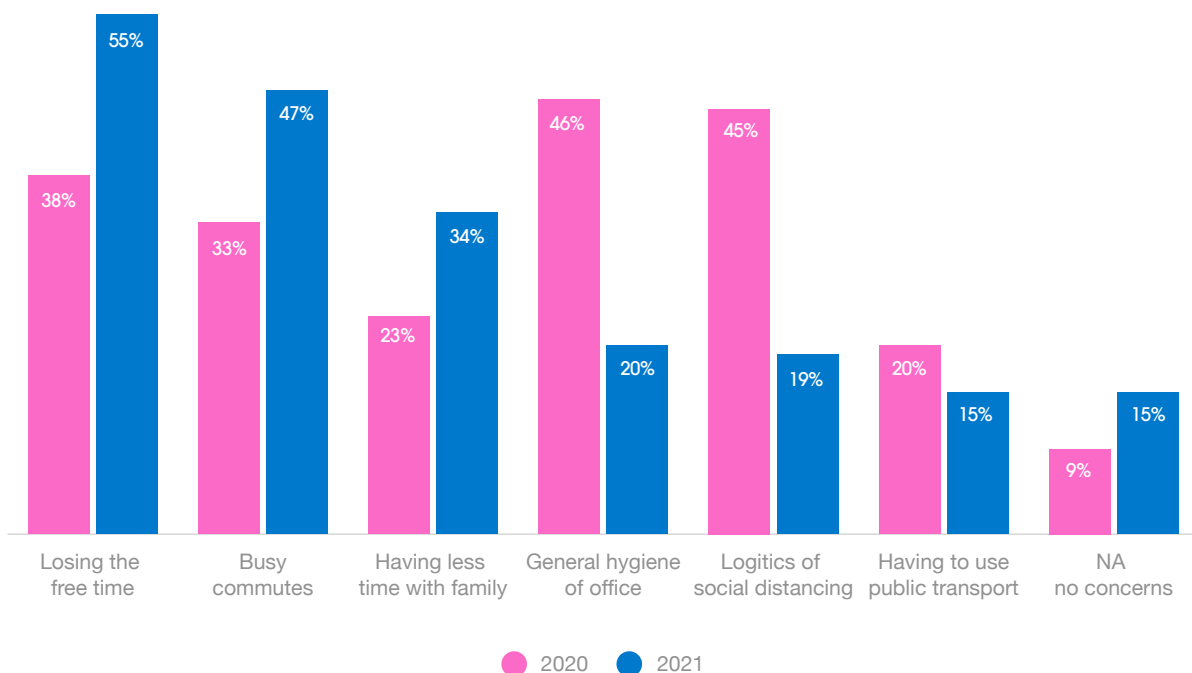
Furthermore, two in five feel more isolated working from home (42%), and three in ten struggle to stay in contact with colleagues (31%). This is particularly an issue for those who joined an organization during the pandemic:

“Starting a new job while dealing with a pandemic is a lot to push through mentally”

“I started working at my current company during the COVID outbreak, so I wasn’t able to meet any of my co-workers. I felt very isolated and almost trapped in my house. It was very lonely and hard not to see anyone or casually chat”

That being said, the majority want to continue to work from home post pandemic (93%). And many have concerns about returning to the office, with two in four feeling anxious (42%) and reluctant (45%) to do so. This is compared to under a third who are excited (29%) and a quarter who are eager to return (24%). These findings are similar to what we saw last year, with 46% feeling anxious and 47% feeling reluctant. However, the reasons behind the apprehension are somewhat different. This year we see a shift in the top concern around going back to the office, from the coronavirus and hygiene to its impact on overall wellbeing. Many are concerned about the loss of the positive impacts of working from home highlighted above.

Concerns about returning to the office



Women research professionals are more concerned about losing free time and having less time with family (60% and 38%, respectively), compared to male research professionals (44% and 25%, respectively).

Employers need to help staff ease back into the office, especially those who have experienced anxiety or depression in the last 12 months

Whilst employers need to be aware and act in a way to defuse anxiety for all employees returning to the office, this is even more true for those who have suffered from depression and anxiety. Three in five of those who have experienced depression feel anxious about the return (61%) and over half of those with anxiety (53%) feel this way, this is compared to 42% of researchers overall. Research professionals who have experienced depression are also more likely to be anxious about the potential viral threats of returning to the office, such as: general hygiene of the office (31% vs. 20% overall), logistics of social distancing (24% vs. 19% overall), or having to use public transport (20% vs. 15% overall). However, when looking at those who have experienced anxiety, losing free time (59% vs. 55% overall) and having less free time with family (38% vs. 34% overall) are stronger concerns. It is therefore important employers communicate their strategy on covid safety and find ways to address the needs of all employees. Hybrid or flexible working patterns will go some way to help accommodate differing wellbeing concerns and create a working environment which is healthy for all.

CONCLUSION

The last year has by no means been easy, and the impacts on mental wellbeing are clear. Our report has revealed that while our collective wellbeing scores remain much the same as 2020, there has been a rise in specific mental health issues, particularly exhaustion and burnout.

The ebb and flow of the research and insight industry is part of what makes it an exciting industry to work in, but it can also mean that long-hours and overly intense workloads sometimes creep in and impact wellbeing. Indeed, our report highlights that workload is becoming increasingly stressful and is again the key reason researchers feel unable to take time off for their mental wellbeing.

While employers are offering more wellbeing initiatives to employees, they must do more to address these fundamental causes of poor mental health and burnout: long-hours and heavy workloads. If employers prioritize addressing this, then we may start to see real, tangible improvements in mental wellbeing.

The pandemic presents a perfect chance for us to reconfigure how we work. The report has shown that employees have reaped the benefits from working

from home – they are happy to be spending more time with loved ones, not having to commute, and having a better work-life balance. Equally, home working has also blurred the lines between home and work, which only seems to worsen as time goes on. This is something to be mindful of as we emerge from the pandemic. That being said, the vast majority want to continue working from home post-pandemic.

As we emerge from the pandemic, employers have an opportunity to reassess working practices and create a structure that enables flexibility and prioritizes wellbeing. However, until employers take responsibility for and action against the burnout affecting their employees, little progress will be made.



AUTHORS



Sophie Holland

Sophie is passionate about mental health and holds a BA Hons in Experimental Psychology from the University of Oxford. She developed Opinium's workplace mental wellbeing audit and heads up Opinium's mental health research team. Sophie is also Head of Wellbeing internally at Opinium, 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.

sophieholland@opinium.com // 020 3119 3686



Giulia Prati

In her role as VP of US Research at Opinium, Giulia leads the agency's US office out of NYC. Giulia has spent her career deploying quantitative and qualitative research methodologies to advise clients on data-driven marketing and communications strategies. Her work for clients has spanned tech, industrial, healthcare, financial services, and CPG. Giulia graduated Magna Cum Laude from Columbia University with a dual degree in Middle Eastern Studies and Sociology.

giuliapрати@opinium.com // 212-754-5425



Louise Thomas

Louise is an experienced research executive at Opinium, and works across a variety of sectors and clients, with a particular focus on projects in the charity and public sector. Louise is passionate about the interplay between physical and mental wellbeing and has brought this passion to the workplace and is part of Opinium's workplace wellness walk team. Furthermore, Louise has worked on projects with clients which address mental and physical wellbeing issues, for example exploring alcohol consumption during lockdown and its effects, and the impacts of lockdown on young adults in the UK.



Grace Miller

Grace is a Research Associate out of Opinium's New York office, where she develops strategic insights for clients across a variety of industries, including non-profit, public relations, and fitness. Grace graduated from Penn State with a degree in History and concentration in Information, Science, & Technology. Before joining Opinium, she worked in digital communications for a Public Relations firm based in Philadelphia.

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 organizations 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.

www.opinium.com :: research@opinium.com :: +1 212 754 5425

About The Insights Association

The Insights Association is the leading voice, resource and network of the marketing research and data analytics community. IA focuses on Four Pillars in its efforts to help members: Protect, Connect, Inform & Promote. IA invests in providing enforceable and respected quality standards, legal and business advocacy, education, certification and direct support to enable its members to thrive in an evolving industry.

www.insightsassociation.org

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

