



Wellbeing in Research: Small steps towards better mental health



FOREWORD - MRS

It might seem strange to start an introduction to a report on wellbeing in the research sector by carrying on about office design. So many times, we look at surveys like this, which deal with very real, but sometimes seemingly overwhelming issues, the problems we face may seem just too large to address.

The latest report of the MRS Delphi Group “[The Rise of the Insight Alchemist](#)” contains much which is relevant to the issues regularly surfaced by this and previous years’ research into mental health and wellbeing. One of the things report contributor and MRS Senior Client Council member Elaine Rodrigo, Chief Insights & Analytics Officer at Reckitt urges us to do in creating change is to “chunk the elephant”; break the enormous issues we face into manageable actions and targets. In this latest report on Wellbeing and Mental Health in the sector there are insights which help us do this.

Which is why I come back to workplace design. In the past, many companies designed open plan working spaces - not for what they were intended to do (increase communication and partnership working), but for maximum financial savings.

Cost of living pressures will reinforce the needs for minimising expenditure. This report makes clear however that a balancing factor in helping staff cope with pressure and a major factor in the success of hybrid working is the design of the workplace, its breakout areas, its lighting. We are never going to return to being based 100% in the office. The office environment needs to be one which complements working from home and is designed to ensure it delivers in its own way to working practices which support our teams.

Many years ago, one of the multinationals for whom I worked emphasized the need to deliver “helicopter” thinking in approaches to problems. It is horrible corporate speak, but the idea I think needs to be resurfaced to prompt all our management and leadership decisions to see all the issues relating to a problem not just the obvious problem on the road ahead.

This report does show improvements in the number of respondents experiencing mental health issues thank goodness, but how much of that is down to coming out the other side of the worst of the pandemic, and how much to positive action by leaders is up for debate.

The research emphasizes also, the issues to do with overwork that showed up so clearly in previous MRS qualitative research [People & Talent – understanding our shortages of talent](#). MRS has a programme addressing some of the shared issues the sector faces in the work and talent space. It includes a workstream on agency culture and leadership. I hope this will generate some actionable ideas to help. In the meantime, we need to study the insight from this report and create an action plan which chunks the issues into smaller ones we can all address.

I am sincerely grateful to Opinium for their ongoing support of this important series of research on this vital issue.

[Jane Frost CBE – CEO, Market Research Society](#)



FOREWORD - OPINIUM

Firstly, I'd like to thank the MRS for working with us on this and making such a valuable endeavour possible.

I'm really pleased to see some encouraging signs after what has been a difficult couple of years for us all. As you'll see when you read on there are reasons to be hopeful; stress levels have fallen and so too has the number of employees experiencing poor mental health.

However, whilst positive these changes are modest. It is important that all of us in the industry continue to work hard to make a difference and I hope that next year these figures have fallen further. Workloads remain the biggest cause of work-related stress and this is something that the sector needs to address, and address collectively.

Elsewhere in the report you'll see that employees who have flexible working patterns between home and office find it extremely beneficial. A key message for leaders in the sector is to give employees autonomy over their own working patterns and styles. Not only does it improve mental wellbeing but a happy workplace is also a productive one.

This year is the fourth year of the project, and I hope that it continues to help us understand the wellbeing of those in the sector and make changes for the better.

James Endersby, CEO Opinium



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 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. We have once again partnered with the MRS to survey 706 market research and insight professionals through their network, with the aim to understand specifically the mental wellbeing of those working in the market research and insight industry.

This year we also decided to pay closer attention to the physical environments in which we work, both at home and in the office and the impact this can have on our wellbeing and productivity.

Throughout the report, we also compare to last year's survey of market researchers, to understand changes over time, as well as our normative national database of UK workers, to understand how the industry fares in comparison to other sectors.

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 organisations 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.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Recommendations

The research provided us with a wealth of data to analyse. Deciding which findings to focus on was no easy task but in summary we found 4 key findings for senior leaders in market research. Many of them build on the findings from the last couple years which we have seen as the industry adapts to and recovers from a major global pandemic.

1. There have been small improvements in mental health but the industry still has work to do

This year we've seen some encouraging signs regarding overall mental wellbeing. Fewer market researchers are struggling with their mental health compared to last year and when compared the wider UK workforce. The good news is that number of workers saying their employer takes mental wellbeing seriously has risen and improvements have been made in what employers are offering. However, market researchers are still not very likely to take time off for their mental health and, as we saw in 2021 and 2020.

2. Whilst stress levels have seen a marginal fall, workloads continue to be the biggest cause of stress

Another encouraging statistic from the report shows that the proportion experiencing high levels of stress has fallen marginally this year. Whilst this is positive, we also see that workloads and deadlines continue to be the main cause of stress. Employers should look at ways to help better manage workloads and communicate with their workforce.

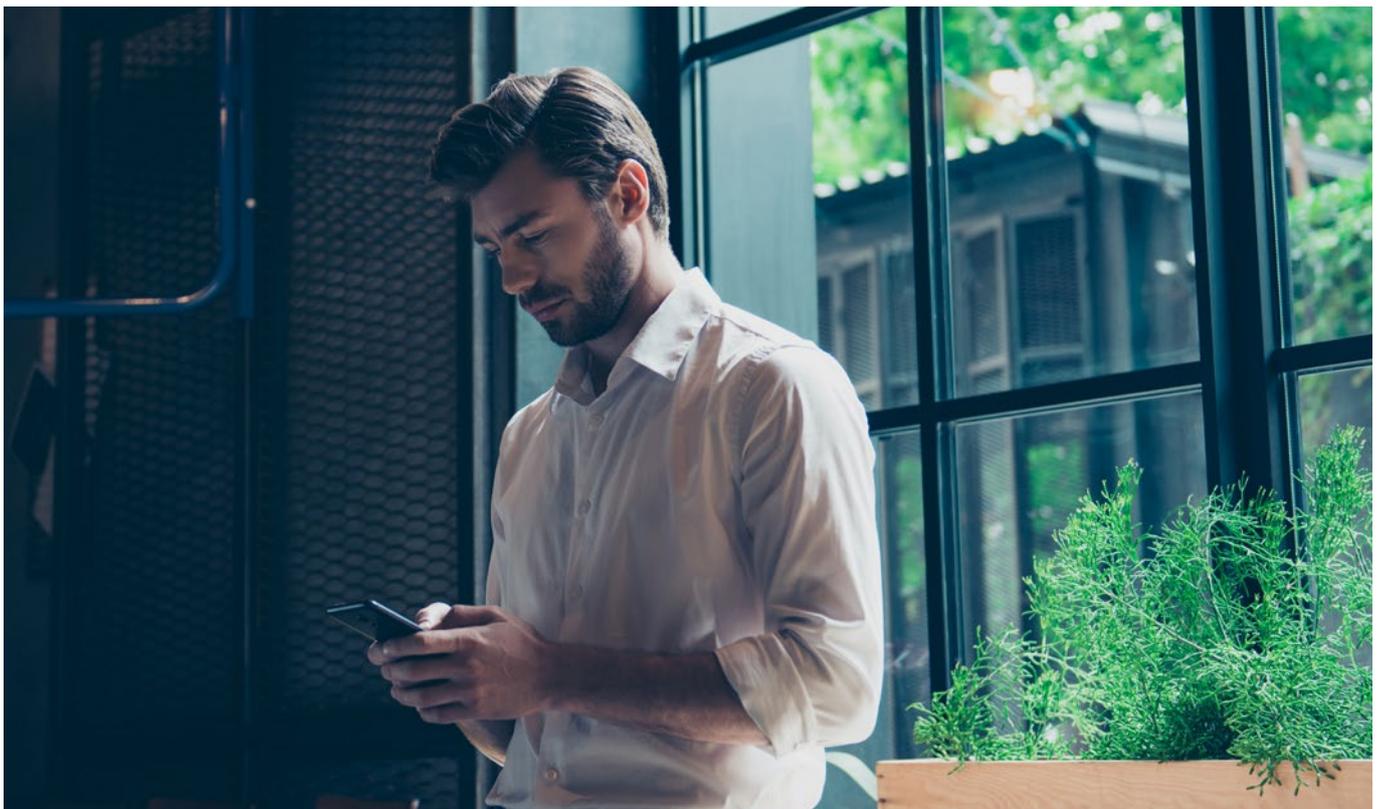


3. Flexible working is popular with workers and beneficial to their health

Workers are clear that working from home is good for their mental health and it provides a better work life balance, freedom from commutes and a more relaxing work environment. Nonetheless, it has its downsides and workers still benefit from certain aspects of the office. Allowing them access to both home and office working with flexibility between the two is key.

4. Offices would be better to work in if they had more outside views, better areas to work away from their desk, and better eating areas.

Generally, employees are satisfied with their offices and whilst there may be drawbacks these are largely made up for by more pleasant surrounds at home (further confirming the importance of allowing home working). However, improvements could be made in providing outside views, better areas to work away from desks, and better eating areas. Therefore wellbeing programmes should also focus on improving mental health through good office design and home working environments because of the real and psychological impacts on wellbeing and satisfaction.



KEY FINDINGS

83% of market researchers have experienced poor mental health, including stress in the last 12 months, down from 87% in 2021.



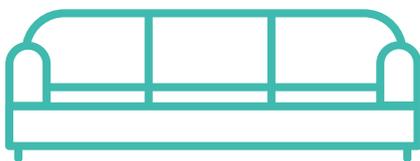
Having too much work to do remains the biggest barrier for taking time off to deal with mental health. Over half (52%) of those who experienced poor mental health cited this as a reason for not taking time off.



One-in-five market researchers (20%) say they find their job stressful (scoring 8 or more out of 10 for stress). This is down from 24% in 2021 and 21% in 2020.



Over half say that working from home has increased their mental health



More people than last year are saying that they feel more relaxed working from home generally (71% vs. 57%) and they have a **better work life balance** a result (75% v. 54%).



Seven-in-ten (69%) say they prefer a mixed approach of office and home working, compared to 39% who support permanent home working and only 9% who support working from an office full-time.



People were more likely to say that their home environment was pleasant compared to their office (81% vs. 74%). This was also the case for appealing (71% v. 62%), and colourful (55% v. 48%).



On the other hand, the office was more likely to be described as having **good lighting** (76% v. 71%). This was also the case for **roomy** (71% v. 59%) and **stimulating** (49% v. 41%).

1. SMALL IMPROVEMENTS IN MENTAL HEALTH HAVE BEEN MADE BUT THE INDUSTRY STILL HAS WORK TO DO

This year we've seen a small but important uptick in mental wellbeing scores. We've also seen a fall in the proportion of those experiencing poor mental health in the last twelve months (83% compared to 87% in 2021).

Whilst this is encouraging to see, these changes are only small, and problems persist; the proportion of those experiencing mental health who take time off to look after their mental health remains small (19%), and lower among market researchers than the national average for workers (41%).

Workloads remain a barrier to taking time off. Just over-half (52%) of those experiencing poor mental health say they didn't take time off to rest because they had too much to do. As we saw last year, there is also still a clear lack of infrastructure set in place within workplaces to help support those who return from taking time off work.

Clear processes to support those who take time off need to be established to better support those struggling with their mental wellbeing. Despite some signs of improvement the industry still has plenty of work to do.

A small uptick in mental wellbeing scores since 2021

We have seen a small but interesting uptick in mental wellbeing scores for those in the market research industry from 46.1 in 2021 to 47.8 this year. This may indicate a small improvement in mental health as we've moved out of the pandemic in the last twelve months or so.

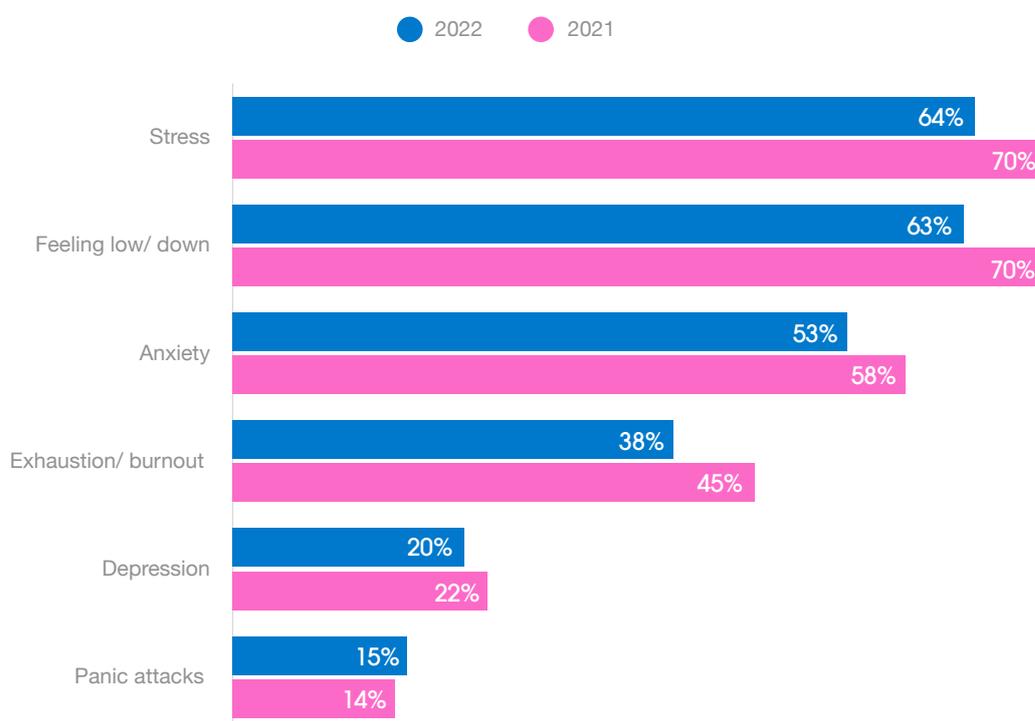
A slight fall in the proportion of market researchers who have experienced poor mental health in the last year compared to 2021

When we look at the proportion of market researchers who have experienced poor mental health in the last twelve months (including levels of stress) the figure has fallen from 87% in 2021 to 83% this year; a return to the levels seen in 2020.

However, market researchers are more likely to experience poor mental health issues than the rest of the UK workforce; a fact that has been the case in previous years too. 67% of UK workers have experienced this in the past year.

Looking at what market researchers have experienced this past year, around two-thirds (64%) experienced stress, 63% experienced feeling low, and 53% experienced anxiety. Interestingly, many of these figures are lower than 2021 and represent a return to numbers seen in 2020.

Top mental health problems experienced in the past 12 months compared to 2021



Market researchers continue to be more reluctant to take time off work for their mental wellbeing compared to UK workers at large

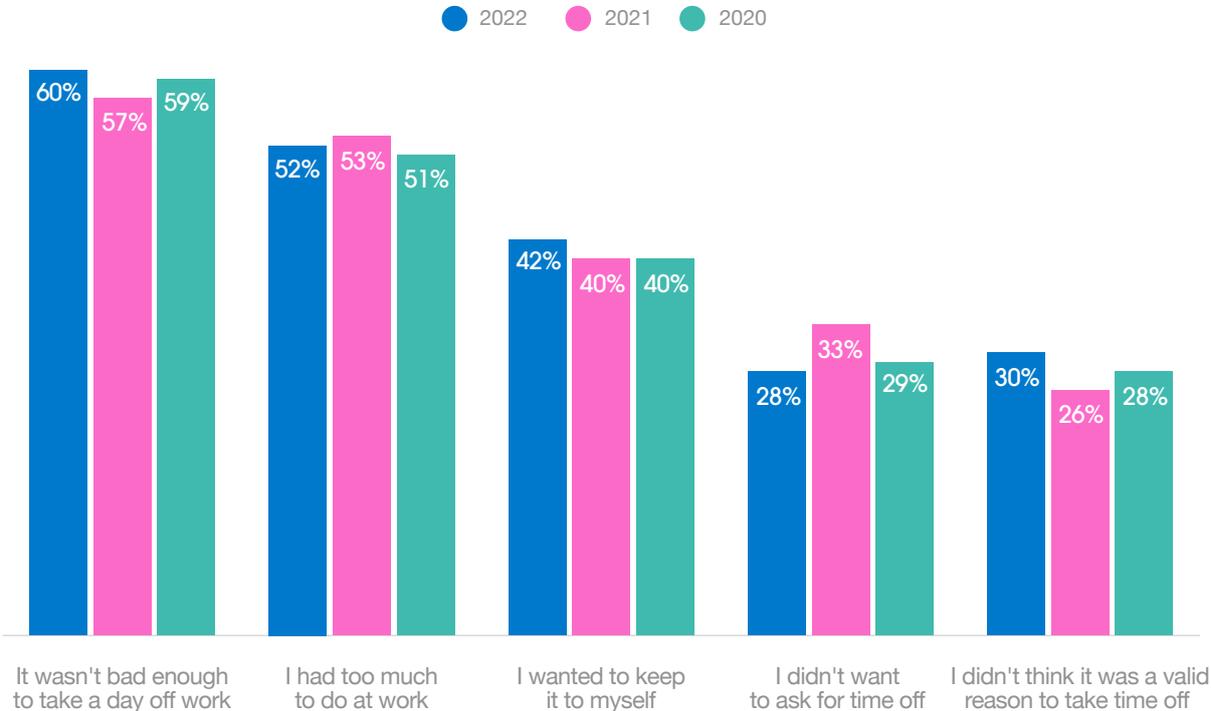
Last year we found that just 18% of market researchers who experienced poor mental health took time off work to rest. This year that figure is much the same at 19%. This is still lower than the national average (41%).

When looking at reasons why market researchers are hesitant to take time off for their mental health, believing it wasn't bad enough to take a day off work comes out as the top reason (60%) similar to last year's figure (57%).

Last year we were keen to point out that an alarming 53% of those experiencing poor mental health had too much to do at work to take time off. Unfortunately, that figure remains high at 52%.

When we look at the other areas in the chart below, we also see that many of the figures are broadly consistent with previous years suggesting that although we have seen progress when it comes to the mental health of those working in the industry, the barriers stopping people from taking time off remain in place.

Top 5 reasons why those who experienced a mental health issue didn't take time off work compared to 2021 and 2020



For those who did decide to take time off for their mental health the benefits were clear, 57% say their quality of work improved and 59% returned to work feeling much better. However, just under half (46%) still felt guilty taking time off work and 35% felt pressure to come back to work early, up from 25% last year.

Last year we proposed that perhaps a lack of support infrastructure or procedures might be leading to these feelings of pressure and guilt. In 2021 just 26% said that there was a clear process in helping them return to work and that number has fallen ever so slightly to 23% this year.

Like last year, 39% were unsure about what support was in place for them when they returned. And worryingly, 21% said that they were not supported when they returned to work after taking time off for their mental health, up from 16% last year.

Clearly there have been some positive movements when it comes to the mental health of market researchers but as these stats show this may have more to do with the wider factors like the pandemic than steps that employers have taken.



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“I think encouraging an open and accepting atmosphere would be a good start. It feels like my workplace tries to take some steps, but these ‘events’ don’t happen often. I don’t currently feel like I can call in sick in the morning if I’ve had a bad night and felt anxious/burnt out/stressed because I am the most junior on my team so wouldn’t want it to look bad on me and I am not sure if this would be understood anyway”

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2. WHILST STRESS LEVELS HAVE SEEN A MARGINAL FALL, WORKLOADS CONTINUE TO BE THE BIGGEST CAUSE OF STRESS

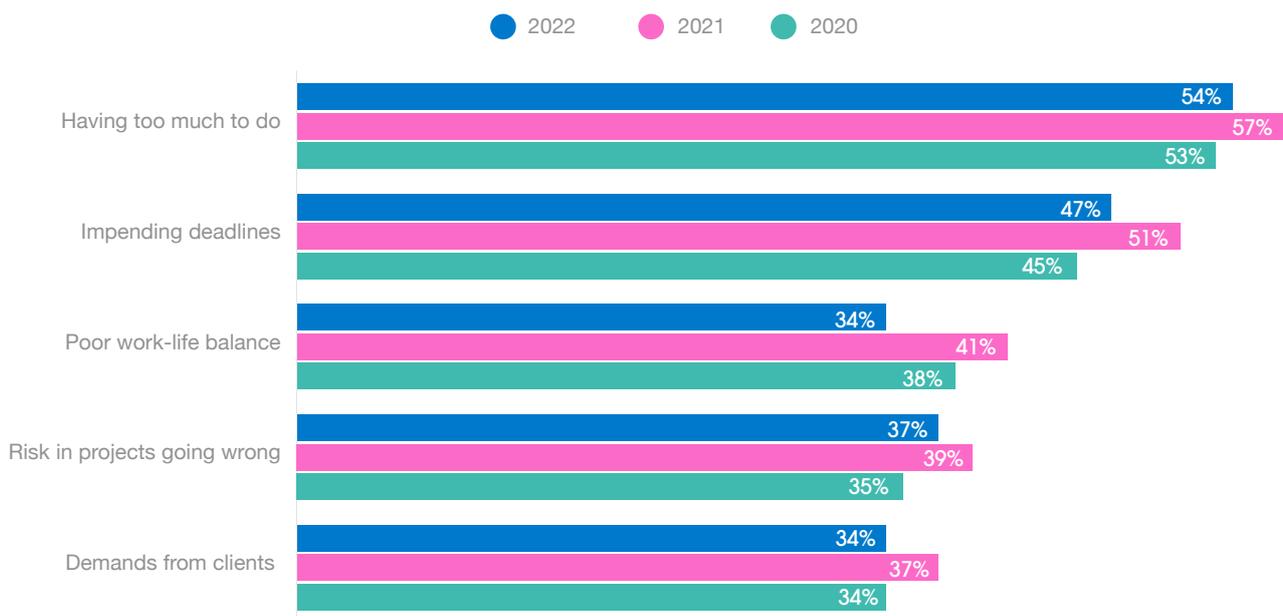
Market researchers find their job ever so slightly less stressful compared to last year; 20% gave a score of 8-10 for stress compared to 24% last year. However similar to last year, the top cause of stress is having too much to do (54%) followed by impending deadlines/ targets (47%).

Over half say having too much to do is a cause of stress

The proportion of market researchers who find their job stressful has fallen slightly. One-in-five (20%) of market researchers say they find their job stressful (giving it a score of 8-10, 10 being extremely stressful), compared to 24% in 2021.

Having too much to do came out as the top cause of stress again this year (54%), down from 57% in 2021, followed by impending deadlines/targets (47%), the risk involved in projects going wrong (37%), and poor work life balance (34%). All of these have fallen slightly from last year as show in the chart below.

Top 5 causes of stress at work compared to 2021 and 2020



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“Part of my issues are driven from mental health strains beyond work and made worse by intense work pressures. Effective resourcing and policing of work hours to support staff would be the biggest support I could accept”

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Having too much to do is also one of the top reasons why market researchers didn't take time off for their mental health (54%). The message remains the same as last year: helping employees manage their high workloads or reducing them all together would break the cycle of employees feeling overwhelmed to the point it harms their mental health but being unable to take time off work because of their workloads.

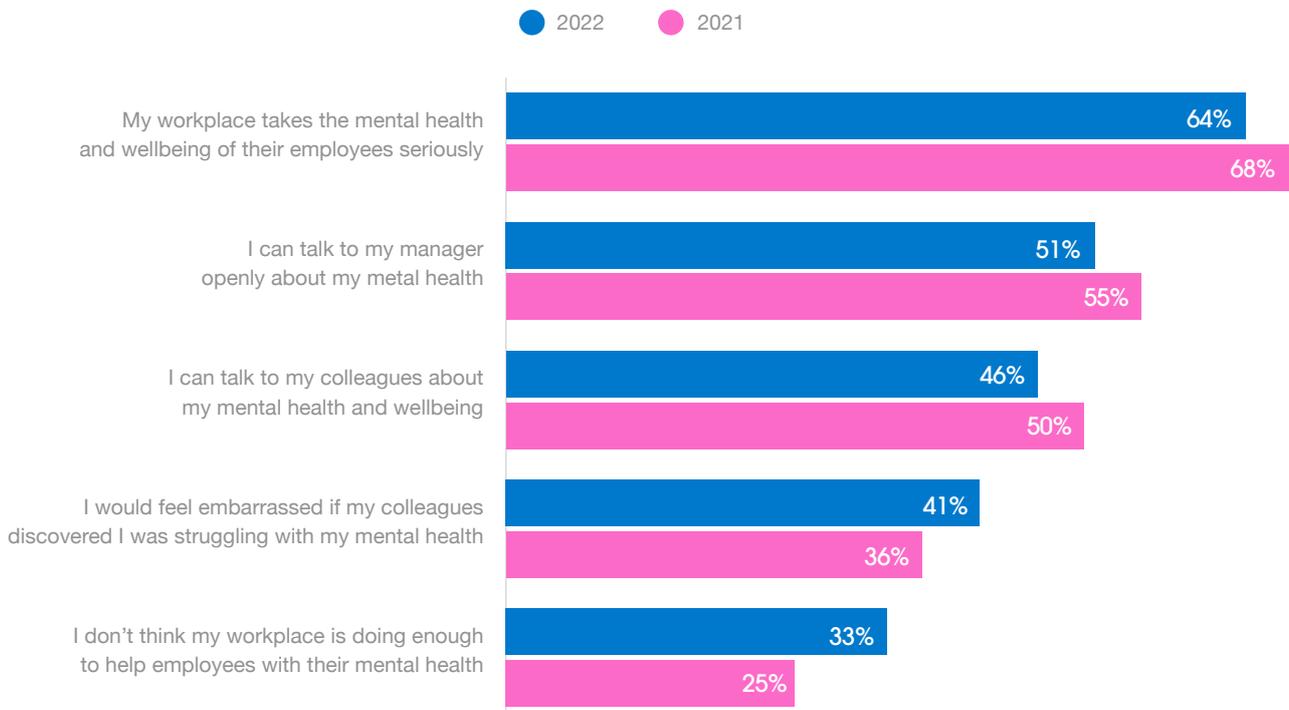
Attitudes towards mental health in the workplace are similar to last year

When it comes to workplace attitudes to mental health figures are much the same as last year in terms of statistical significance.

However, there has been a significant fall in the proportion who don't think their workplace is doing enough to help employees. Last year a third (33%) felt this was the case but this year the figure has fallen to a quarter (25%). This is good news and implies that some businesses have made improvements over the last twelve months.

“Overall my employer does this well, we have mental health first aiders and there's an open culture, the physical environment of the offices is good. A counselling scheme might be good, I have seen the business provide additional support to individuals but it's not publicized or part of a formal policy”

% of non-sole traders who agree with the following



3. FLEXIBLE WORKING IS POPULAR WITH WORKERS AND BENEFICIAL TO THEIR HEALTH

Broadly speaking working from home is hugely beneficial to the mental health of workers. Over half (55%) say that working from home has increased their mental health and this year there is evidence that many are adjusting to new patterns of working. More people than last year are saying that they feel more relaxed working from home generally (71% vs. 57%) and they have a better work life balance as a result (75% v. 54%).

When it comes to the potential downsides, and working from home is not without them, here we see a fall in the number of workers experiencing negative effects; 56% say they struggle to get outside compared to 65% last year. This year 48% said they struggled to draw boundaries between work and rest whereas the figure was 57% in 2021.

Clearly we can see that as workers become more accustomed to working from home the more they appreciate its benefits and adapt to its drawbacks. The message from workers to bosses is clear; they want the ability to work where they want. Seven-in-ten (69%) say they prefer a mixed approach of office and home working, compared to 39% who support permanent home working and only 9% who support working from an office full-time.

Over half say working from home has increased their mental wellbeing

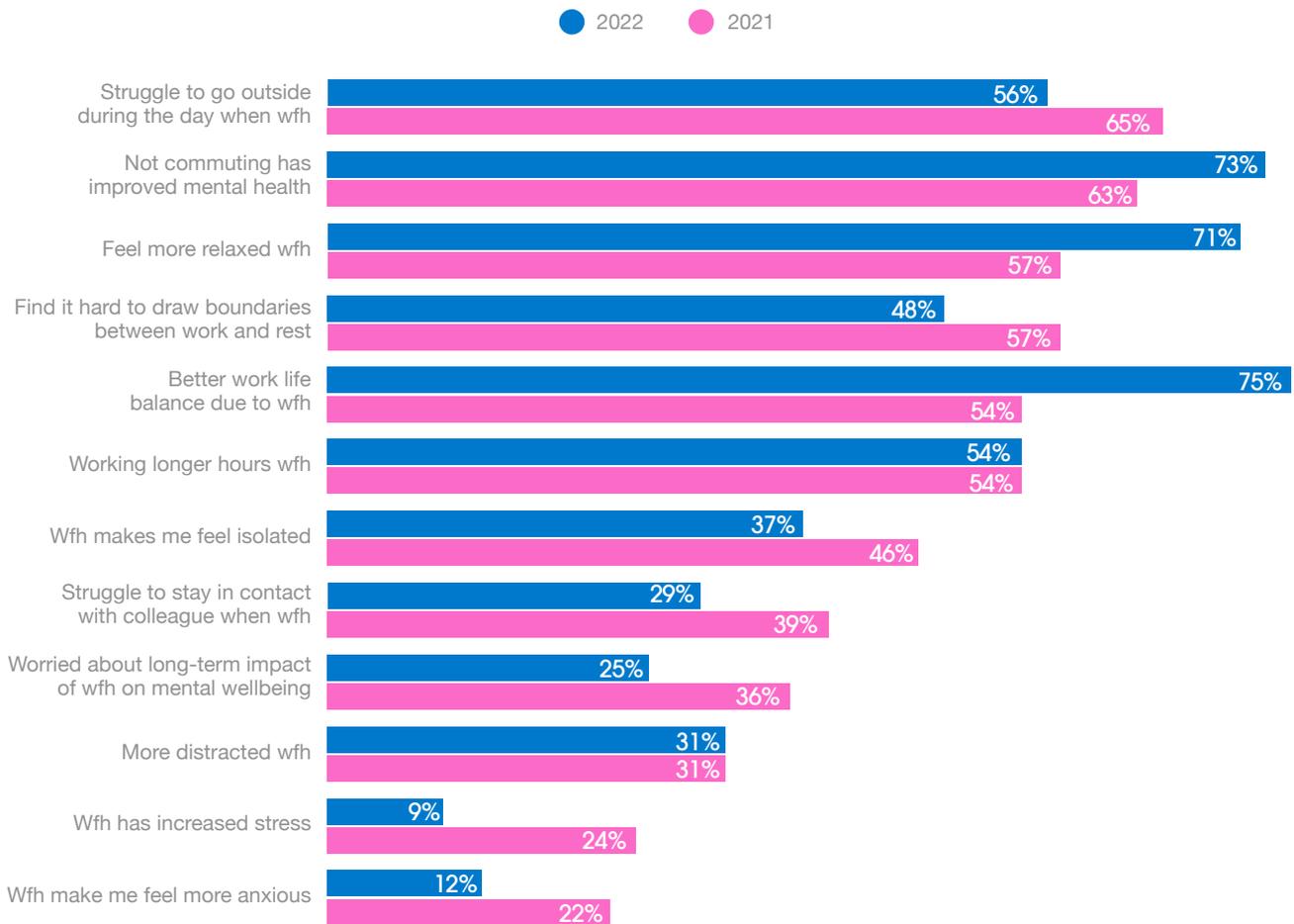
Before the pandemic around 58% of those in market research worked from an office all of the time. This number has now fallen to 5%. Working from home has huge benefits for workers, giving more control over how and where we work.

Over half, 55% say that these changes in working patterns have increased their mental wellbeing, whilst 21% said it had made no difference and 16% said it had decreased their wellbeing.

When we look at the pros and cons of working from home we can see how workers have adjusted to increased home working over the last year. Almost three quarters (73%) say not commuting has improved their mental health, up from 63% last year. A similar figure (71%) say they feel more relaxed working from home compared to 57% last year. But perhaps the most resounding increase is the 75% who say they have a better work life balance due to working from home, up from 54% in 2021.

Working from home still has its downsides but here we see that the proportion experiencing these has fallen compared to last year. In 2021, 65% said they struggled to go outside during the day but this has fallen to 56% this year. Similarly, in 2021 57% said they found it hard to draw boundaries between work and rest whereas this year that figure is 48%.

Pros and Cons of working from home on mental wellbeing



The positive effects of working from home and the flexibility it gives workers in the industry is borne out by the fact that 69% say they support a mixed approach of office and home working. This compares to 39% who support permanent home working and only 9% who support working from an office full-time. The advice for employers is clear; allow your workers to work at office or at home depending on what suits them.

4. HOME AND OFFICE ENVIRONMENTS PROVIDE DIFFERENT BENEFITS, BUT OFFICES COULD DO BETTER IN TERMS OF WORKING AND EATING SPACES

With so many of us now working from home at least some of the time, we wanted to understand what the quality of the working environment is like both in the office and at home.

This is especially important as we know that the physical design of working environments can have a real and significant impact upon employees' wellbeing, satisfaction and productivity.

For example, previous research has highlighted that colour has been shown to influence task performance and satisfaction, whilst views or representations of nature help restore mental capacity and natural lighting can help reduce stress levels (Nieuwenhuijsen K, 2010; Ochiai H, 2015).

It is therefore increasingly important to make sure employees have supportive environments both at home and in the office and wellbeing programmes also focus on improving mental health through good office design and home working environment.

What's clear from these findings is that the home is more likely to be seen as appealing, pleasant, and colourful. However, workers are more likely to say that the office is stimulating, has good lighting and is roomy.



Workers are also more likely to be satisfied with the outside views and décor of their home working space whereas desk space and desk chairs are better in the office. However, offices could do more to provide outside views, better places to work away from desks, and better eating areas. Overall, this confirms the importance of allowing workers the flexibility to work from home or the office whilst providing responsive environments that supports employees' needs both at home and in the office.

Whilst a home working environment is more likely to be considered appealing, the office is more likely to be seen as stimulating

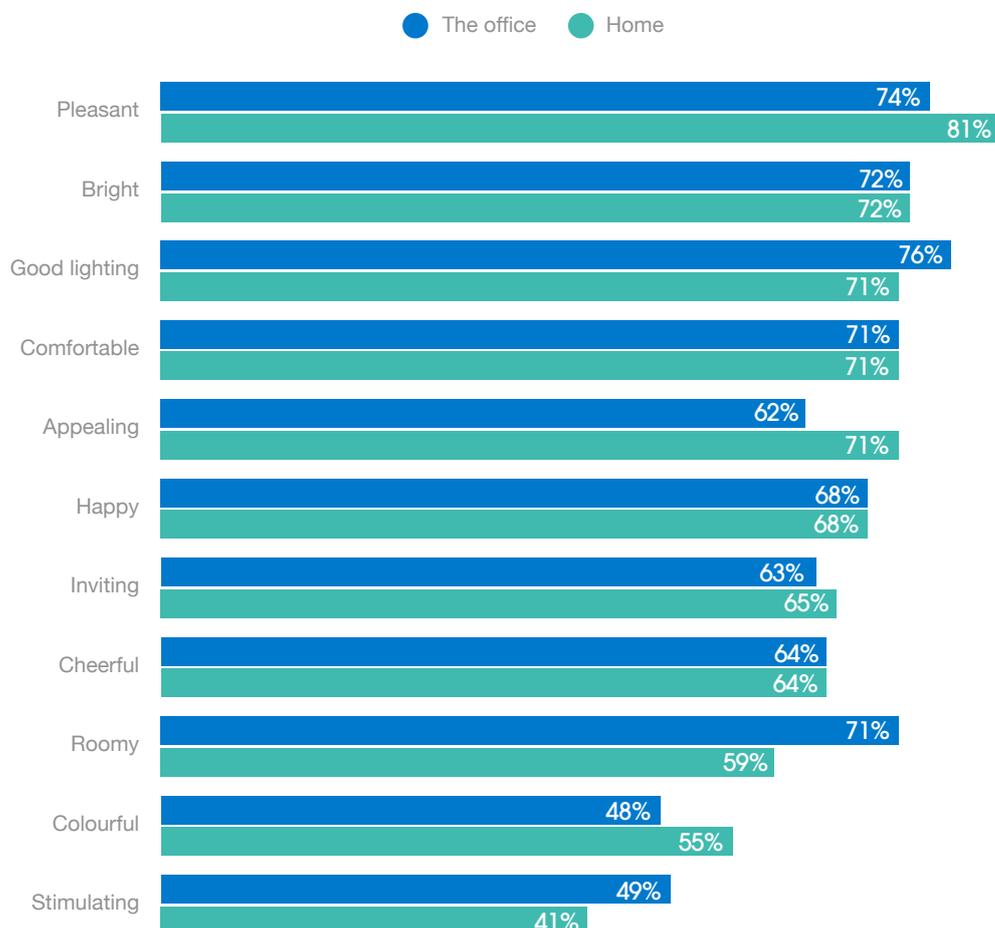
The environment is an important part of our working lives and certainly plays at least some role in our mental wellbeing. We asked respondents to consider a series of opposing words and select which they felt most applied to their working environments.

We ask these questions about both the office and the home working environment. Interestingly in most cases there was no huge difference between the two. However, some interesting differences did appear.

People were more likely to say that their home environment was pleasant compared to their office (81% vs. 74%). This was also the case for appealing (71% v. 62%), and colourful (55% v. 48%).

On the other hand, the office was more likely to be described as having good lighting (76% v. 71%). This was also the case for roomy (71% v. 59%) and stimulating (49% v. 41%).

Words associated with working environments



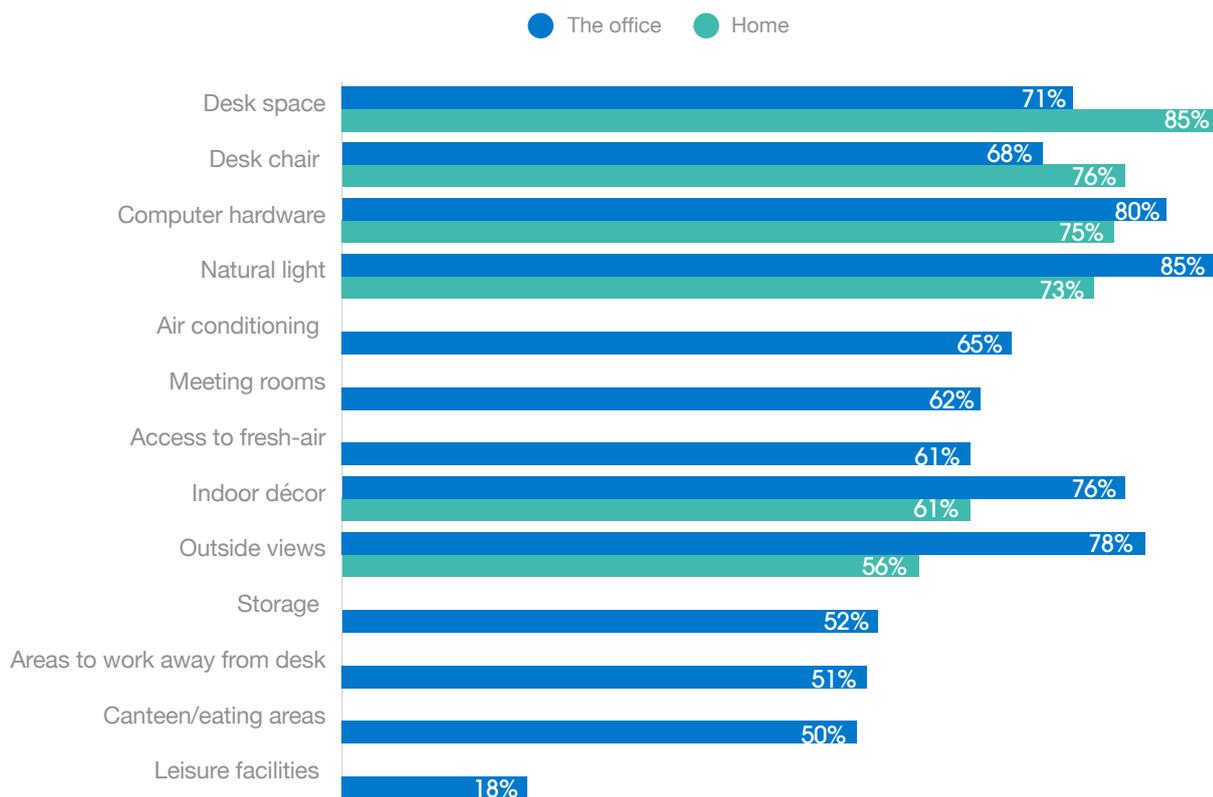
Natural light, outside views, and hardware are all better at home than in the office

When we look at satisfaction levels with various features of working from home and in the office interesting differences emerge.

Looking at the office first, satisfaction levels are highest when it comes to “desk space” (85%) and “desk chair” (76%). Lower down the scale satisfaction levels are lower when it comes to “outdoor views” (56%), areas to work away from desk (51%), and eating areas (50%).

At home, satisfaction levels are highest for natural light (85%), computer hardware (80%), and outside views (78%).

% satisfied with various office features





CONCLUSION

Small improvements in mental wellbeing are beginning to show. We've seen this in better wellbeing scores, a small drop in the number experiencing poor mental health, and lower levels of stress.

However, we're still seeing the same barriers to workers taking time off to protect their mental health, mostly because of workloads. Market research can often involve long hours and intense workload. It's up to employers to try and help their staff manage these workloads and put in processes and procedures which reduce the burden.

What is abundantly clear is that working from home has been hugely beneficial to the mental wellbeing of those in the industry. It's improved work-life balance, reduced the need for stressful and uncomfortable commutes, and handed workers greater autonomy.

That said, employees still appreciate the office particularly when it comes to practical things like desk space and comfortable seating. Moving forwards, we need to think about the role of the physical design of employees working environment whether at home or in the office in order to help support wellbeing and satisfaction.

Successful leaders will be those who allow their workers to offer flexibility in work locations.



AUTHORS



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Kate is passionate about mental wellbeing and has an academic background in Work Psychology and interest in the role of the office design on wellbeing and productivity. At Opinium Kate works closely on mental health and employee research and leads the internal wellbeing team at Opinium introducing workplace initiatives to support physical and mental wellbeing as well as leading our internal annual and pulse employee and wellbeing surveys across Opinium.



Joe Curran

Joe works across a number of practice areas with a particular interest in the third-sector and public affairs. Most recently he has worked with charities helping refine their communications strategy through quantitative and qualitative research. He is a member of the political polling team and Opinium's Mental Wellbeing Team.

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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