Wellbeing Strategies: Effective in Managing Sickness Absence?

Insights and Recommendations for Employers

Foreword

The CIPD has recently reported the highest levels of sickness absence in the last 10 years[1]: 7.8 days on average per employee per year. Minor illness, musculoskeletal injuries and mental ill health are reported as the top three causes of short-term absence, with mental ill health, musculoskeletal injuries, acute medical conditions and stress being the most common causes of long-term absence (four weeks or more). Data from the Office for National Statistics[2] also shows that sickness absence due to long-term conditions is now at the highest rate since 2008 and long-term sickness is the main cause of economic inactivity amongst the working age population[3].

With so many employers now offering wellbeing benefits and initiatives and a significant amount also having a wellbeing strategy in place, as employment lawyers we were puzzled and interested by these statistics. Could the increase be due to:

1. An increase in health conditions?
2. Employees not getting the medical treatment and support they need?
3. Employees feeling more comfortable reporting that they are unwell or taking time off work when they are unwell?
4. Employers not providing a healthy work environment or sufficiently supporting employees in the workplace?
5. Employers not managing sickness absence effectively?

Events such as the pandemic, long COVID[4], the economic downturn, the cost-of living crisis and longer waiting times to receive medical treatment due to the severe pressures the NHS is facing, all seem likely to have had an impact on the wellbeing of the UK population and whether they are thriving in work.

As employment lawyers we wanted to understand the other potential factors at play – whether there was an increased acceptability regarding taking time off and what more employers could do to promote wellbeing in the workplace. We commissioned a survey of over 1,000 employees and 250 senior HR leaders from 30 April to 7 May 2024*. We asked what employers and employees feel are the key factors for promoting wellbeing in the workplace; what strategies, benefits, and initiatives employers actually have in place; and whether employers could be more effective in their wellbeing offering in order to improve the health of their employees.

We were particularly interested in whether "wellbeing washing" was taking place with employers giving the appearance of caring about wellbeing but not actually implementing meaningful strategies. Are employers just providing sticking plasters and superficial initiatives such as free fruit, yoga classes and wellbeing seminars (where leaders do not follow the recommendations) and not making organisational changes to ensure employees are properly supported? Is the focus on the employee's role in their wellbeing rather than on the organisation's culture e.g. ensuring employees do not work long-hours, feel supported by managers and have autonomy in their work? We considered the issue of "wellbeing washing" in our research, and we also set out our key recommendations for promoting wellbeing in the workplace, which we hope you find useful.

If you are interested in finding out our top tips on how to manage sickness absence, then we are offering two free workshops for HR professionals on 18 June 2024 and 25 September 2024 where practical advice will be provided during an informal and interactive discussion using detailed case studies. Places are limited and you can register your interest here (events@wslaw.co.uk).

Winckworth Sherwood LLP

*All figures, unless otherwise stated are from Censuswide. Total sample size was 250 senior HR leaders (fieldwork was undertaken between 30 April to 7 May 2024) and 1,002 employees (fieldwork was also undertaken between 30 April to 3 May 2024). The survey was carried out online. The respondents work for organisations from a wide range of sectors that range in size from 1 to over 500 employees.

[1] CIPD (2023) Health and wellbeing at work. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
[2] Office for National Statistics: Sickness absence in the UK labour market: 2022
[3] IANC01 SA: Economic inactivity by reason (seasonally adjusted) - ONS
[4] An estimated 1.9 million people living in private households in the UK (2.9% of the population) are experiencing self-reported long COVID (Office for National Statistics)

Key Facts and Statistics

86% of employers and 69% of employees agree that it is more acceptable for employees to take time off work when they are unwell than previously, particularly in relation to mental health issues.

18% of employees and 26% of employers feel it is now more acceptable to take time off work for menopause symptoms.

84% of employers believe their wellbeing strategy, initiatives or benefits have reduced levels of sickness absence.

The **No. 1** reason for organisations having a wellbeing strategy or offering is to improve the productivity of their employees.

7th in the list of priorities for employers when putting in place a wellbeing strategy is striving for a healthier and more inclusive culture.

The top 3 measures

considered the most effective in promoting mental health in the workplace and preventing sickness absence for mental ill-health are:

By Employers:

1. fair pay and reward
2. "good work" and increasing awareness of mental health issues
3. promotion of flexible working

By Employees:

1. "good work"
2. fair pay and reward
3. promotion of flexible working

Only around **50%** of employers admit that they offer their employees fair pay and reward, "good work" and promote flexible working.

68% of employers and 67% of employees believe that too much onus is put on employees to improve their health and wellbeing, as opposed to the organisation improving the work environment and culture.

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This question essentially asked whether there has been a cultural change meaning that employees now consider it is more acceptable to take time off work when they are unwell than they did previously. Our research confirmed that the vast majority of employers (86%) and employees (69%) agree that this is the case.

These results show a slight disparity in how employers and employees view (86% versus 69%) the situation and there could be a number of reasons for this. It may be that many of the employers we interviewed attribute the increased levels of sickness absence to employees being more comfortable taking time off, whereas, in fact, it may be that a proportion of employees have always felt comfortable taking time off when ill and so did not report a change. It could also be that many employers are not conscious of the high levels of "presenteeism" (people coming to work when unwell) and "leavism" (working during annual leave, or outside contracted hours) that still exist in organisations (as reported in the CIPD survey), compared to the number of employees who are aware that such practices are still prevalent. The results also showed that age was a relevant factor when answering this question, because many more employees in the younger age groups felt there had been a change, compared to those in the older age groups, where the positive responses were significantly less. We noted that in the younger age group (18-24) some of these employees may not have even been in the working world for 5 years, but clearly there is a perception that things have changed given that 82% agreed that employees are now more comfortable taking time off work when unwell.

Do you consider that part of the reason for the increase in sickness absence across the UK could be attributed to employees now feeling more comfortable reporting they are unwell or taking time off when they are unwell?

Employers
said Yes

86%
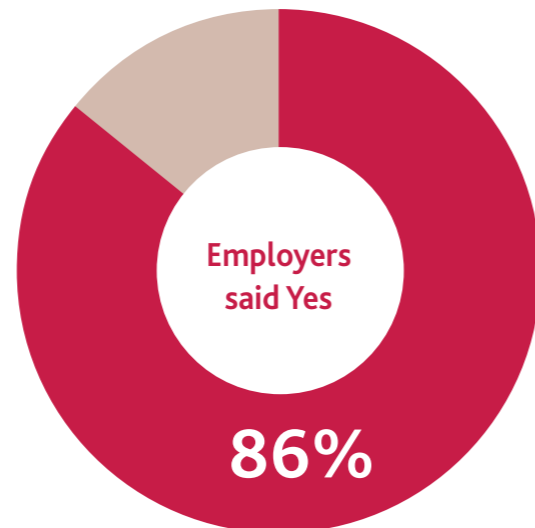
Do you consider that it is now more acceptable to take time off work when unwell than five years ago?

Employees
said Yes

69%

Employees

82% 76% 70% 64% 55%

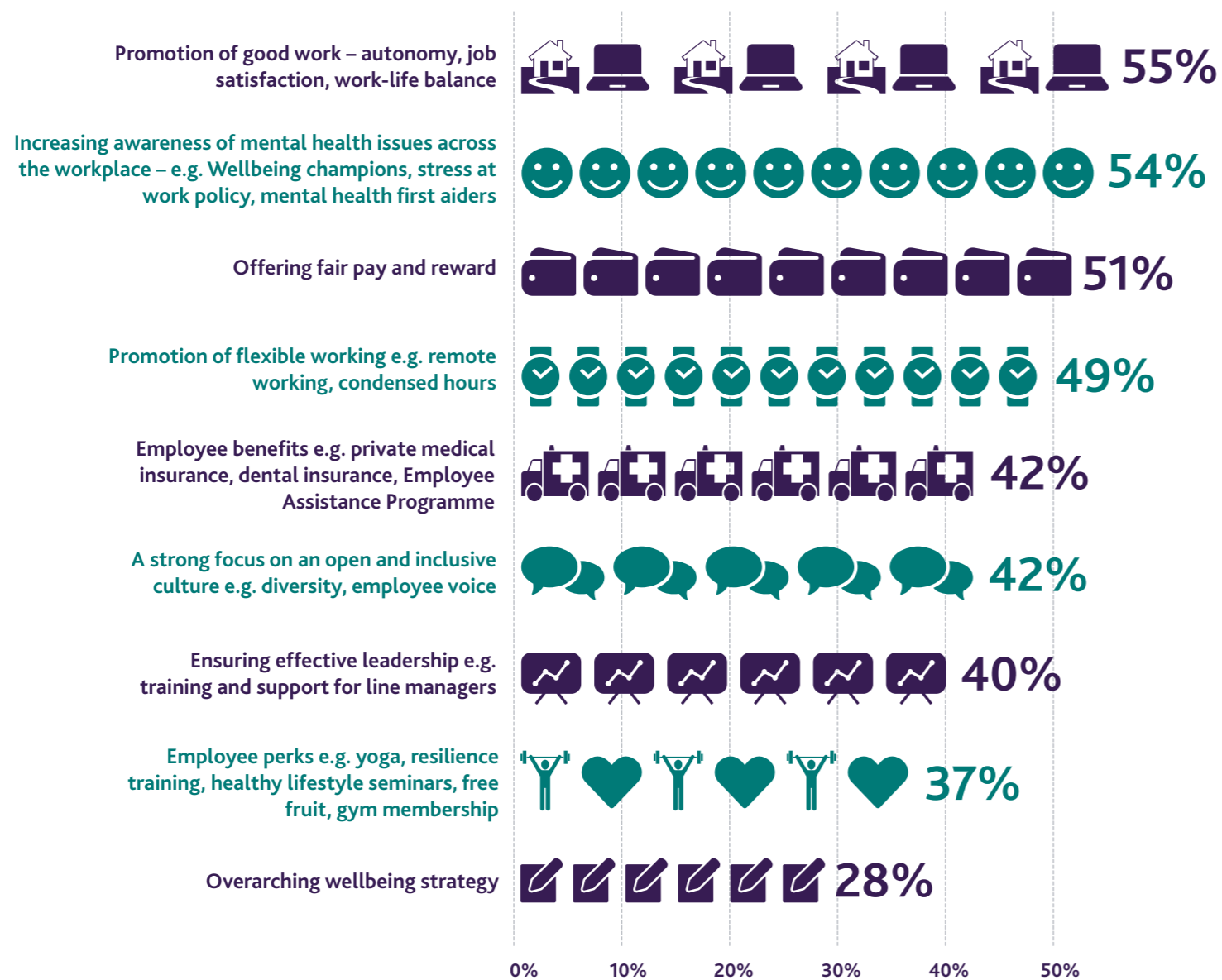Age 18-24   Age 25-34   Age 35-44   Age 45-54   Age 55+
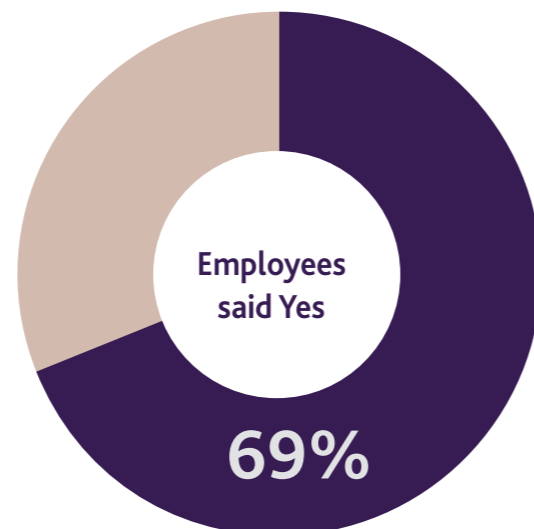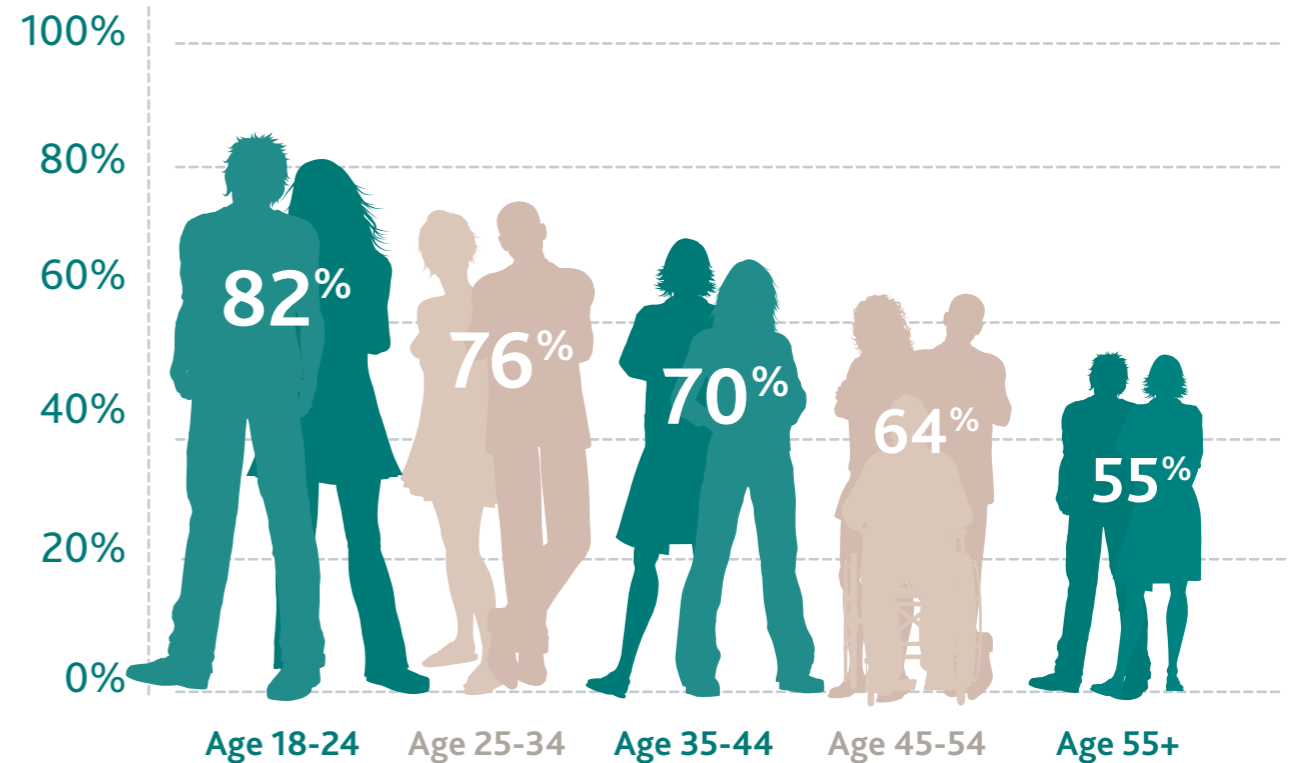
Both employers and employees felt that there had been the greatest change in relation to mental health issues, meaning where previously an employee may not have been comfortable disclosing a mental health issue to their employer, or asking for time off work for a mental health issue, the majority would now feel more comfortable doing so. These statistics are perhaps not a surprise given the efforts which have been undertaken in recent years to remove the stigma over mental health issues and are a positive sign that these efforts have been successful.

In relation to physical health issues, the results were notably less, only 43% of employees and 48% of employers reported that there had been a change in acceptability. The results for the male respondents

were also slightly less than compared the female respondents.

Interestingly, when we drilled down into the results, only 18% of employees and 26% of employers felt that it was more acceptable to take time off work for menopause symptoms compared to five years ago. Given the recent campaigns to promote awareness of the menopause and the impact it can have on women in the workplace, we were surprised that these results were not higher. The results suggest that there has not been meaningful change in this area and that more progress needs to be made before employees are comfortable taking time off for menopause related symptoms.

Which are the most common wellbeing strategies, initiatives and benefits that organisations have in place?

Promotion of good work – autonomy, job satisfaction, work-life balance	55%
Increasing awareness of mental health issues across the workplace – e.g. Wellbeing champions, stress at work policy, mental health first aiders	54%
Offering fair pay and reward	51%
Promotion of flexible working e.g. remote working, condensed hours	49%
Employee benefits e.g. private medical insurance, dental insurance, Employee Assistance Programme	42%
A strong focus on an open and inclusive culture e.g. diversity, employee voice	42%
Ensuring effective leadership e.g. training and support for line managers	40%
Employee perks e.g. yoga, resilience training, healthy lifestyle seminars, free fruit, gym membership	37%
Overarching wellbeing strategy	28%

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%

As we can see from the results, there are a whole variety of wellbeing related measures which organisations have in place, ranging from employee perks, to promoting flexible working, to having an overarching wellbeing strategy. What surprised us with these results was the lack of organisations offering things that we would consider essential to a healthy work environment, such as fair pay and reward, which only 51% of organisations said they offered, and promotion of "good work" (autonomy, job satisfaction and work-life balance) which only 55% of employers cited.

The lowest ranked wellbeing measure cited in our survey was an overarching wellbeing strategy (only 28% of respondents said they had one). We strongly believe that having an overarching wellbeing strategy is important to effect real change within an organisation as explained later in our report.

Do employers consider that their wellbeing strategy, initiatives and/or benefits have reduced the levels of sickness absence in their organisation?

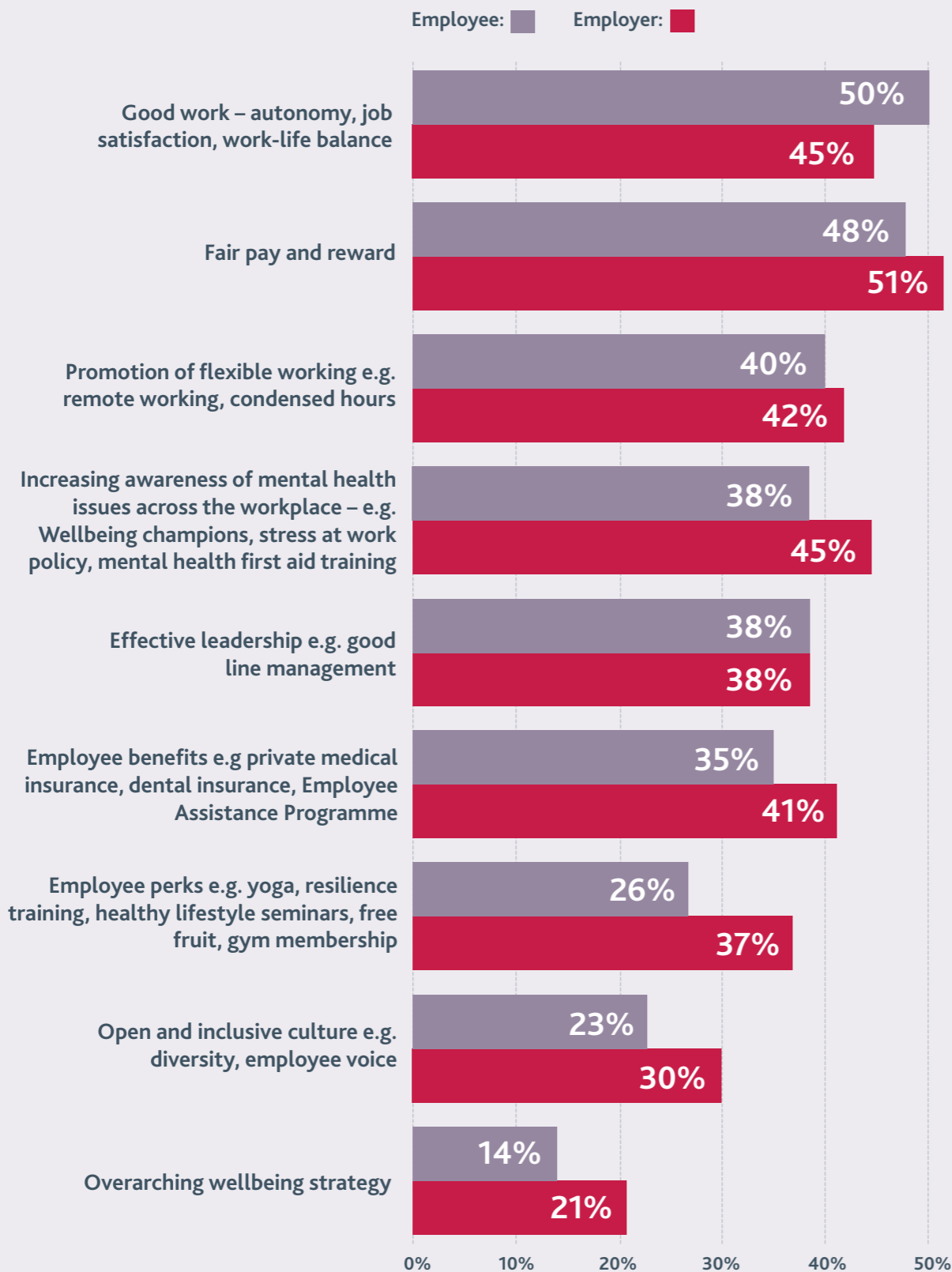**84%**

Employers said Yes

The vast majority of employers (84%) said that their wellbeing strategy, initiatives and/or benefits had reduced the levels of sickness absence in their organisation, particularly in relation to long term absence which is a very positive statistic and supports the need for wellbeing offerings in the workplace.

This is a particularly positive statistic when employers, by their own admission, are not offering wellbeing benefits and initiatives for the main purpose of reducing sickness absence. Reducing sickness absence was reported to be only the fourth priority for employers in our survey (see Page 11 below). The significant reduction in sickness absence as a consequence of the wellbeing offering therefore appears to be more of a bonus, rather than a planned outcome.

Which measures do employers and employees consider are the most effective to promote mental health and prevent sickness absence for mental ill-health?

Employee: ▮ Employer: ▮

Good work – autonomy, job satisfaction, work-life balance
- Employee: 50%
- Employer: 45%

Fair pay and reward
- Employee: 48%
- Employer: 51%

Promotion of flexible working e.g. remote working, condensed hours
- Employee: 40%
- Employer: 42%

Increasing awareness of mental health issues across the workplace – e.g. Wellbeing champions, stress at work policy, mental health first aid training
- Employee: 38%
- Employer: 45%

Effective leadership e.g. good line management
- Employee: 38%
- Employer: 38%

Employee benefits e.g private medical insurance, dental insurance, Employee Assistance Programme
- Employee: 35%
- Employer: 41%

Employee perks e.g. yoga, resilience training, healthy lifestyle seminars, free fruit, gym membership
- Employee: 26%
- Employer: 37%

Open and inclusive culture e.g. diversity, employee voice
- Employee: 23%
- Employer: 30%

Overarching wellbeing strategy
- Employee: 14%
- Employer: 21%

(axis: 0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%)

Employers and employees agree on the top three things that promote mental health in the workplace and prevent sickness absence for mental ill-health: "Good work" (autonomy, job satisfaction, work-life balance); fair pay and reward; and the promotion of flexible working (e.g. remote working, condensed hours). Despite both employers and employees placing importance on these three factors, as we have already seen from earlier in our report, around half of employers admitted they did not offer these to their employees.

Employers additionally considered that increasing awareness of mental health issues in the workplace such as having Wellbeing Champions, a Stress at Work policy and offering mental health first aid training was important ranking it alongside "good work" as 2nd in effectiveness. Employees considered this was slightly less important ranking it 4th. This may be because employees believe they already have this awareness due to the steps that a large number of employers have taken in recent years in reducing the taboo of mental ill-health in the workplace. This is also evidenced by the results of our survey that employees feel it is more acceptable to take time off for mental ill-health in the workplace than five years ago.

Employee benefits (e.g. private medical insurance, employee assistance programme) and employee perks (e.g. yoga, free fruit, gym membership) were ranked lower in effectiveness (5th and 6th by employees and 4th and 6th by employers) with both employers and employees agreeing that providing employee benefits were more effective than employee perks. Interestingly employers felt that employee perks were much more effective in promoting mental health and preventing sickness absence than employees considered they were (37% of employer respondents versus 26% of employee respondents). This suggests that employers' focus on offering employee perks is misplaced and they should be focussing more on the factors employees care most about.

Employers and employees placed little importance on employers having an overarching wellbeing strategy with it being ranked 8th by both. This may be because employers and employees consider some of the underlying factors that can impact on wellbeing such as "good work" or employee benefits are more important than an overarching strategy or that they see it as merely a "tickbox" for organisations rather than it actually being worthwhile. Our view is that having a meaningful and effective wellbeing strategy which goes beyond a series of standalone initiatives is imperative in ensuring a thriving place to work and we cover this in in our recommendations.

Gender Difference

The results were similar for male and female employee respondents except that more female employees considered that promoting flexible working was effective in promoting mental health in the workforce (43% of female respondents versus 33% of male respondents). This is not surprising as women predominately take responsibility for childcare in our society. Interestingly, more female employees (29%) than male employees (21%) thought that employee perks were effective.
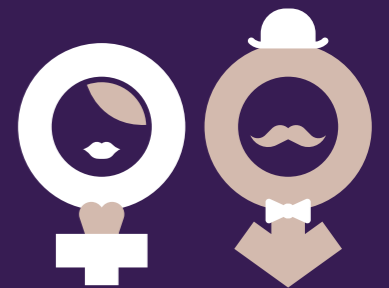
Age Difference

The charts identifying the top five answers by age group of which measures would be the most effective for promoting mental health and preventing sickness absence show there are different priorities dependent on age. Fair pay and reward and "good work" were in the top two answers for all age groups save for ages 25-34 where promotion of flexible working pipped fair pay and reward to the post as the 2nd ranking. Increasing awareness of mental health issues for employees aged 18-24 was ranked joint second with "good work", so employees in this age group consider this is very important and that work still needs to be done in this area. Employee benefits was ranked higher for ages 18-24 and 45+ than employees aged 25 – 44 and effective leadership was ranked higher for ages 25+ than employees aged 18-24.

Age 18-24

- Fair pay and reward
- Increasing awareness of mental health issues across the workplace
- Good work – autonomy, job satisfaction, work-life balance
- Promotion of flexible working
- Employee benefits

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%

Age 35-44

- Fair pay and reward
- Good work – autonomy, job satisfaction, work-life balance
- Promotion of flexible working
- Effective leadership
- Increasing awareness of mental health issues across the workplace

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%

Age 45-54

- Good work – autonomy, job satisfaction, work-life balance
- Fair pay and reward
- Increasing awareness of mental health issues across the workplace
- Effective leadership
- Employee benefits

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%

Age 25-34

- Good work – autonomy, job satisfaction, work-life balance
- Promotion of flexible working
- Fair pay and reward
- Effective leadership
- Increasing awareness of mental health issues across the workplace

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%

Age 55+

- Good work – autonomy, job satisfaction, work-life balance
- Fair pay and reward
- Effective leadership
- Employee benefits
- Increasing awareness of mental health issues across the workplace

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%

Why do employers have a wellbeing strategy or offer wellbeing initiatives/benefits?

1 Improve productivity

2 Better work-life balance

3 Improve staff retention

4 Reducing sickness absence

5 Improve employee engagement and morale

6 More effective working relationships

7 Strive for a healthier and more inclusive culture

8 Enhanced employer brand

9 Keep us in line with competitors

10 Other

The top reason given by employers was to improve productivity rather than to promote a healthier and more inclusive culture (ranked 7th in the main reasons), reduce sickness absence (ranked 4th) or improve employee engagement and morale (ranked 5th). Although improving productivity is an important commercial driver, is there an issue in terms of authenticity if the primary reason for employers having a wellbeing strategy and offering is to benefit the employer rather than the employees? We are concerned that employees could feel cynical about their employers' offerings if employers are only really concerned about business performance or are perceived to be by employees. This would be an issue if, although the employer publicly states it places importance on wellbeing and has some initiatives, leaders are not leading by example and an unhealthy working environment still persists with employees not feeling genuinely supported.

We consider that workplaces could be even more effective in promoting a healthier culture and preventing sickness absence for mental ill-health if employers reconsidered the priorities for their wellbeing strategies and offerings.

Is there too much responsibility on employees to improve their health and wellbeing?

Both employees and employers agreed at similar rates (68% and 67%) that there was too much responsibility on employees to improve their wellbeing as opposed to employers improving their work environment and culture. Only a tiny proportion of employees and employers disagreed with this statement: 9% of employees and 14% of employers. We believe that this, coupled with the results regarding authenticity (improved productivity being the main reason for having a wellbeing strategy or offering) and what employers have actually implemented (only around a half of employers have implemented the measures

which employers and employees believe are the most effective) are clear indicators that "wellbeing washing" is occurring within organisations. Rather than employers taking responsibility in ensuring meaningful organisational change to improve wellbeing, such as providing "good work" and fair pay and reward, promoting flexible working and ensuring effective leadership, too much focus is on employees to make changes themselves. We consider that employers could be more effective in improving wellbeing and reducing sickness absence if they take action to improve organisational culture.

Is too much of the onus put on employees to improve their mental and physical health and wellbeing, as opposed to employers improving their work environment and culture?

Employee

67% AGREE   9% DISAGREE   24% DON'T KNOW

Employer

68% AGREE   14% DISAGREE   18% DON'T KNOW

Recommendations

Our recommendations on how to effectively promote wellbeing in the workplace are:

1 Obtain data about wellbeing within your organisation e.g. sickness absence records, current levels of engagement with wellbeing activities, exit interviews and focus groups

2 Use the data to identify the challenges to wellbeing in your organisation to shape your goals e.g. improving employee retention and recognise that the challenges may be different across the workforce e.g. for different age groups

3 Set clear KPIs based on identified needs and objectives

4 Create your wellbeing strategy - this will be unique to your organisation reflecting your challenges and will involve targeted initiatives

5 Get buy-in from senior leaders to your strategy with leaders leading by example

6 Communicate your strategy and consider how to do this for your different audiences

7 Implement your strategy creating meaningful impact

8 Embed the strategy into your culture and make sure there is change at an organisational level e.g. improving unrealistic workloads

9 Critically evaluate the success of your wellbeing strategy against your KPIs – has what you have been implementing been worthwhile?

10 Adapt your strategy following the evaluation exercise to ensure that it is positively evolving as areas for improvement are identified.

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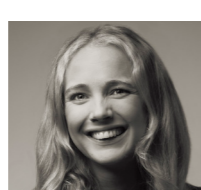
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Legal 500 2024

"The highest standard of work, both written and verbal, exceptional knowledge and they are completely aligned as a team and communicate internally and with clients very well."
Legal 500 2024

'They are a highly skilled and experienced team that understand what is required. They have a range of experience in many different, varied and complex areas.'
Chambers and Partners 2024

'The team has genuine strength and depth, with senior lawyers able to provide clear and pragmatic advice on the most complex and strategically important issues whilst also being down to earth, highly efficient and extremely responsive.'

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