



Continuing the Conversation: Mental wellbeing in market research 2020



FOREWORDS

“I love my rush hour commute on the Circle Line” said nobody ever, so it is perhaps not surprising that a positive impact of lockdown has been the removal of the stress that comes with the daily commute.

I am delighted that this second Wellbeing Report conducted by MRS with Opinium does show some very positive movement on issues around the wellbeing of staff in the Research sector. It may well be, that having to implement a radical review of working practices as a result of Lockdown, has meant that more attention has been paid to the mental health of staff in many agencies.

What is really important however, is that no matter how the “return to work“ develops, leaders must grasp the opportunity to design work place practices that reflect the learning from this disruption in all our lives. Designing positively for blended working rather than relying solely on tactical responses to changing circumstances is vital. This will allow us to get the benefits of creating new ways to retain workplace culture and the positives of serendipity, learning and creativity that come from interacting in teams and in person, with the undoubted benefits of fewer stressful physical journeys and more child care flexibility (amongst other things) that come from working from home. One of the disasters of the conversion to open plan office working is that it was frequently seen as an exercise solely in cost reduction, not as a means to creating a more creative and responsive working culture. Let’s avoid repeating that mistake now we have the opportunity.

To help enable this, MRS has launched the Flex Forum – a specialist group which provides guidance and events on how to create the right environment for a happy and productive workforce.

I would like to thank Opinium for their continued partnership with MRS in this undoubtedly vital piece of work. I hope that the positive change reflected in this research is something we can build on and see continued returns in the next survey.

Jane Frost CBE – CEO, Market Research Society

Change is in the air.

When we launched this audit last year, we hoped to help fellow agencies and in-house teams implement better wellbeing practices and accelerate change in workplaces across the market research industry, so it’s great to see that this year’s results show such improvement. However, as an industry, our work is far from over. As our 2020 report shows, there are still many areas linked to mental wellbeing where businesses can do more.

Looking after our wellbeing at work is made all the more urgent in the light of a global pandemic. Not only are we worried about our immediate physical health but the threat of the Coronavirus to our jobs and livelihoods also directly impacts our mental wellbeing. It’s vital that employers look after their people during this crisis and its aftermath.

Yet there are some positives to take from this moment of uncertainty. The vast majority of us in the market research industry find ourselves working from home, a privilege that those in other industries were not afforded. As the report shows, this change to our patterns of working has had many positive effects, from having more free time to feeling less stressed by busy commutes. There may be many important lessons we can take from this period about how employers might improve the working culture at their workplaces in the future.

Huge thanks to Jane Frost and her brilliant team at the MRS for giving us the platform to survey its members and help accelerate change!

James Endersby – CEO, Opinium



BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Continuing the Conversation: Mental wellbeing in market research 2020

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

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



On the subject of the economic fallout of the virus, different sectors are affected in very different ways. For this study we partnered with the Market Research Society (MRS) to look specifically at the mental wellbeing of those working in the market research industry and how they are coping in the context of a pandemic.

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

The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)

A key element of our audit is the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale; a rigorous and scientific method designed by the University of Warwick with funding from NHS Health Scotland. Not only does the scale give our research a robust method for measuring mental wellbeing it also distinguishes our approach from the myriad of other mental health surveys by giving us a benchmark to work with that is underpinned by academic research.

Looking at the scores of the scale, the mental wellbeing of an individual can be determined in terms of whether it falls above or below the national average. The scale enables us to quantify mental wellbeing, thus promoting wider understanding of mental wellbeing as a whole. A further use of the scale is to encourage effective improvement of mental wellbeing for the individual, by tracking scores over time, and to equip organisations and wider society to support the enhancement of mental wellbeing.



*Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) © University of Warwick, NHS Health Scotland and University of Edinburgh, 2007, all rights reserved. If you would like to use the scale, please visit the University of Warwick website for more details: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs/>

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Recommendations

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

1. Don't get complacent

Our data shows that in the last twelve months a great deal of progress has been made in helping employees better manage their mental health at work, and this is something all of us in the industry can be proud of. However, there is still lots of work to do and plenty of areas for improvement. Our message to employers is don't get complacent! Keep up the good work and keep striving for better mental health amongst your employees.

2. Continue to offer wellbeing programmes and initiatives

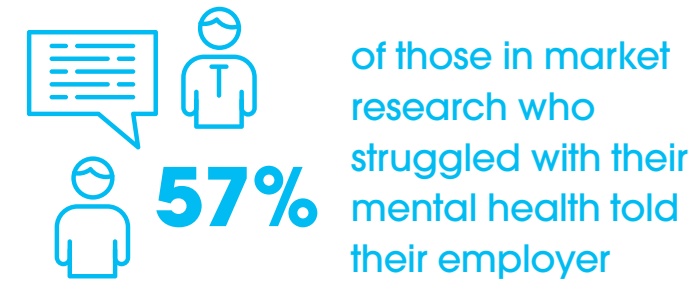
Our research shows that where programmes and initiatives have been implemented employees have found them helpful and have reported benefits to their mental wellbeing. Employers who offer these programmes should continue to do so, and those that don't should look to introduce them. There are still some types of initiatives that are not being provided despite employee demand for them.

3. Learn from the lockdown

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

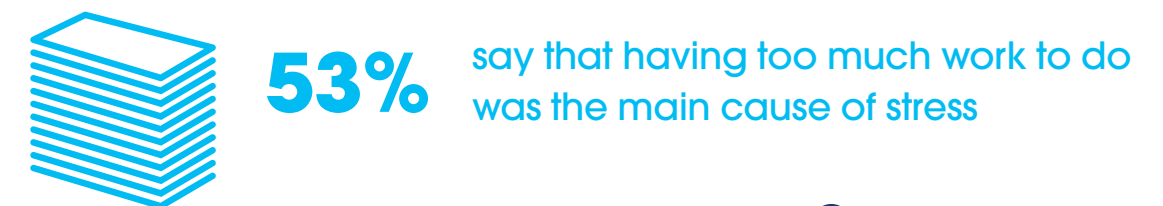


KEY FINDINGS

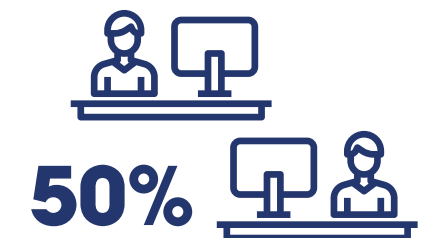


62% of those who did take time off for their mental wellbeing told their employer the exact reason and did not feel the need to blame it on something else

38% say they would still feel embarrassed if their colleagues discovered that they were struggling with mental health



62% say not having to commute whilst in lockdown has improved their mental health



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

2/3  say their current workplace takes the health and wellbeing of their employees seriously



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

1. DON'T GET COMPLACENT

Compared to the national picture and figures from last year, there seems to be a culture geared toward acceptance and understanding when it comes to mental health in the workplace. More market researchers feel comfortable discussing their mental wellbeing with fellow colleagues and reported positive feedback. Yet, change is still needed. 21% of market researchers did not share their mental health struggles with employers for fear of jeopardising their career and 51% refused to take time off because of “having too much to do”. If these issues aren’t tackled, the fear is employee’s mental wellbeing will deteriorate in the long run. Refusing to get complacent will be key in this instance, by continuing to cultivate a safe space for employees to air their concerns and take time off to recover if needed.

WEMWBS score unchanged from 2019

The good news is that despite the challenges posed by the pandemic the overall WEMWBS score among those in the market research industry has changed very little; 46.1 this year compared to 46.3 last year.

This is also higher when compared to the score of 45.5 among UK workers across all industries.

The culture around mental health is changing for the better

Almost six in ten (57%) of those in market research who struggled with their mental health told an employer, higher than the national average (39%) and figures from 2019 (36%). Two fifths (41%) did however decide not to share their struggles.

Those who were comfortable to share, generally reported a positive experience. Three quarters (75%) said the colleagues they told were understanding and supportive (up from 62% last year) and only 8% said they didn’t take it seriously enough (down from 15% last year).

Expanding upon their experiences, those who spoke up said they felt heard and were given time to go to counselling.

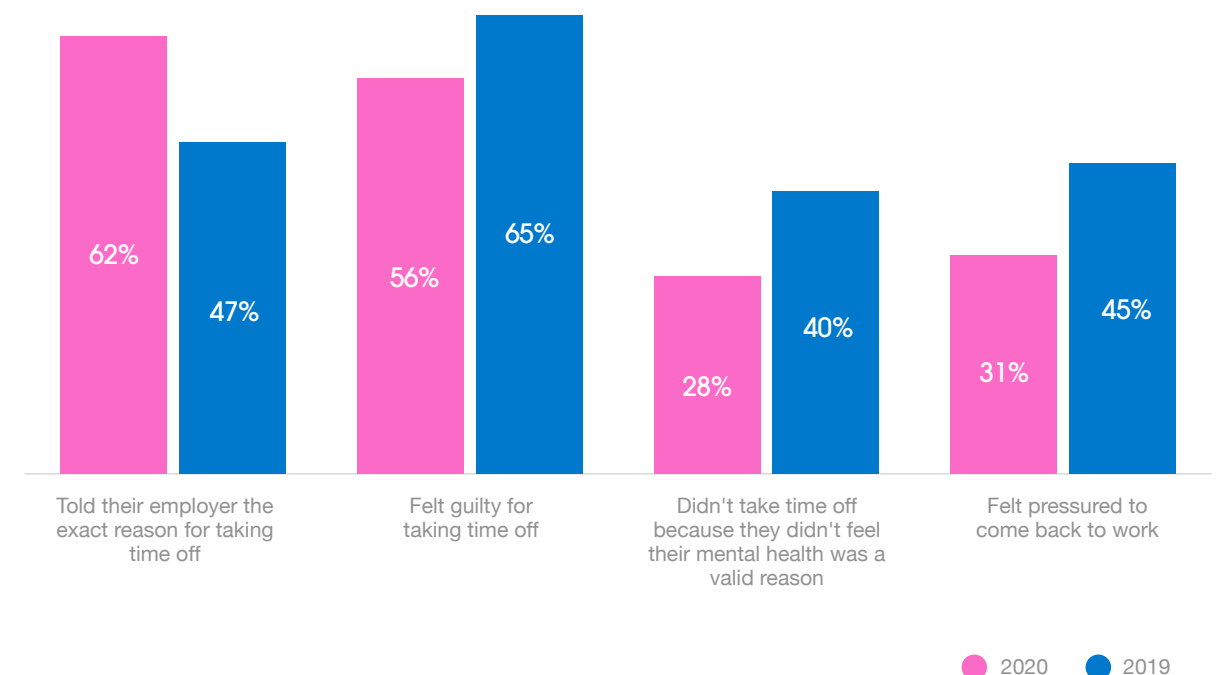
“Everyone responded positively - I was given the time I needed to attend counselling, work in a different environment (not the office) if I needed to.”



There is evidence for a good deal of progress in other areas. For example, last year 40% of those in the industry said they didn’t take time off because they didn’t think their mental health issue or problem was a valid reason to take time off. This year that figure is down to 28%.

On a related note, 62% of those who did take time off say they told their employer the exact reason one and didn’t feel the need to blame it on something else. This is up from 47% in 2019.

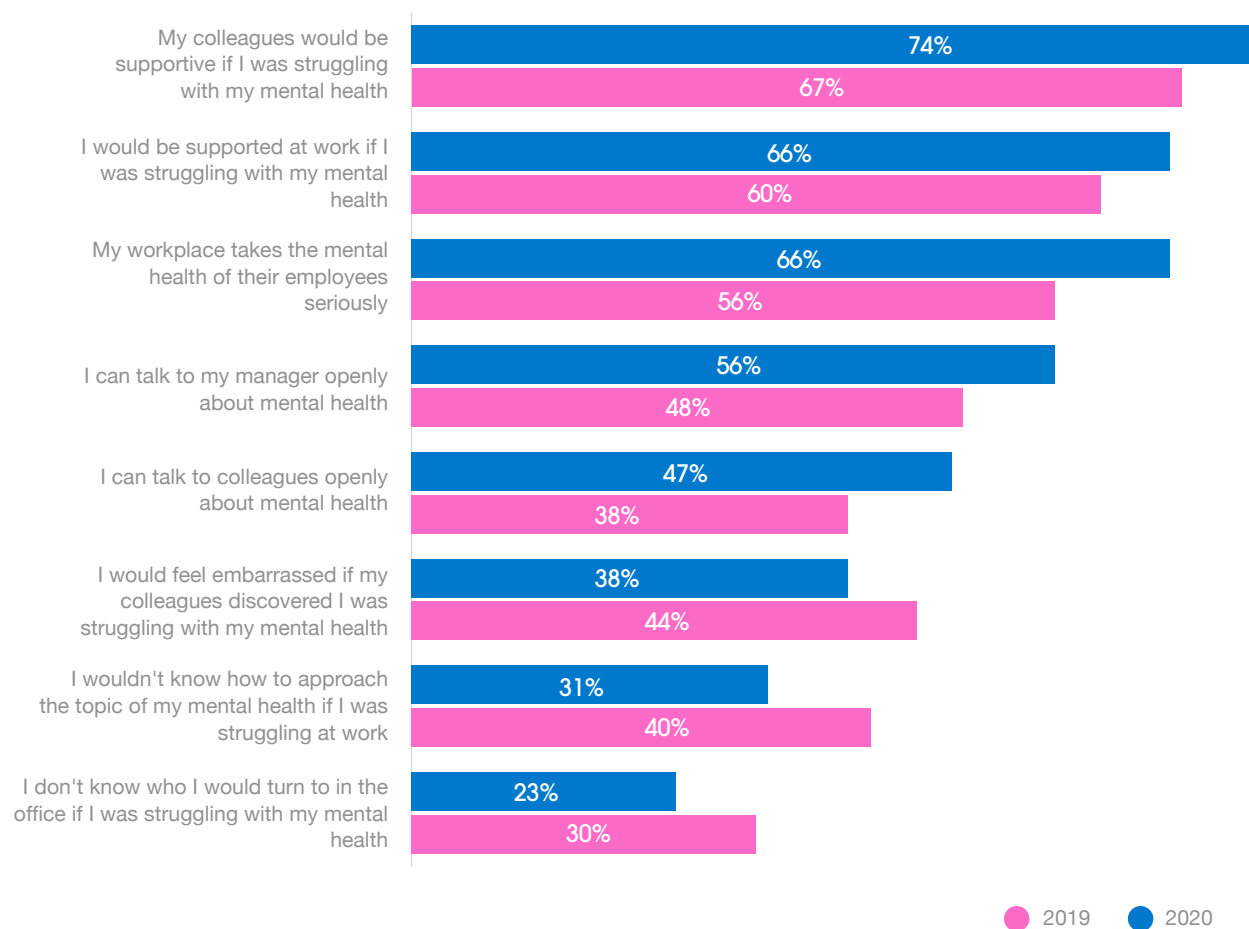
Experiences of taking time off for mental health



Attitudes are also adapting...

Attitudes towards mental wellbeing in the workplace at both peer and managerial levels have improved since last year. Three quarters (74%) of market researchers say their colleagues would be supportive if they were struggling with their mental health (compared to 67% last year). Two thirds (66%) say their current workplace takes the health and wellbeing of their employees seriously and the same proportion feel like they would be supported at work if they were struggling with their mental health (both up from last year at 56% and 60% respectively).

Attitudes towards mental health in the workplace



Still work to do...

Despite the positive shift in attitudes toward mental wellbeing in the workplace, more work needs to be done. There is still a sense of embarrassment when discussing these issues as 38% say they would feel embarrassed if their colleagues discovered that they were struggling with mental health and 31% say they wouldn't know how to approach the topic of their mental health if they were struggling.

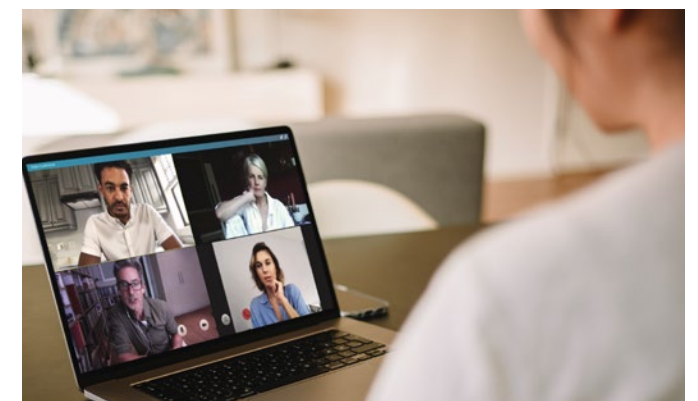
Market researchers also still find their job more stressful compared to the national average this year. A fifth (21%) of market researchers say they find their job stressful (giving it a score of 8-10, 10 being extremely stressful), compared to 18% of the UK workers. Although these figures are down from last year (28% of market researchers and 19% of UK workers found their job stressful last year), having too much to do was the top cause of stress this year (53%), followed by deadlines (45%), the impact of coronavirus on the company (40%) and poor work-life balance (38%).

Having too much work to do was also cited as the top reason people did not take time off to rest and recover from mental health problems (51%).

This is compared to only 9% of the general working population who said the same, suggesting that work pressures and deadlines are a specific barrier and could be detrimental to the mental wellbeing of those in the market research industry.

Work still needs to be done to reduce the stigma around discussing mental health within the workplace. Employers should provide a safe environment a safe environment where employees can discuss their mental wellbeing without consequence, reassuring staff that their mental wellbeing is important.

As mentioned earlier, 41% of those who struggled with their mental health did not discuss it with an employer. Alarmingly, some of the reasons why included 'I didn't think it was appropriate to discuss my mental health at work' (25%) and 'I thought it might jeopardise my career' (21%). Many mentioned their mental health not being big enough to discuss, and stress 'being part of the job'.



"I felt these were 'normal' situations to be in, and also, because I had taken days off because of a migraine and a couple of nasty colds, I didn't want to be perceived as weak or attention seeking (absurd as it sounds, I know)."

"Unfortunately, this is part of life today - we are all under stress a lot of the time. I don't think there's much you can do about it"



“(Employers need to) keep talking about mental health to continue to reduce the stigma and making it easier to speak and listen to your colleagues: it is sometimes difficult to know what to say to someone who is going through a rough time.”

2. CONTINUE TO OFFER PROGRAMMES AND INITIATIVES

As the previous section made clear, there has been lots of progress in the last year. This may have much to do with the role of employers in changing their workplace culture through various initiatives.

We can see that some initiatives are clearly working e.g. exercise/ recreational classes at lunch or after work and a space for people to take breaks at lunch. Access to these initiatives within the workplace will continue to improve the wellbeing of employees. Employers should continue to identify new areas and needs that will provide a benefit to employees.

Initiatives that are working

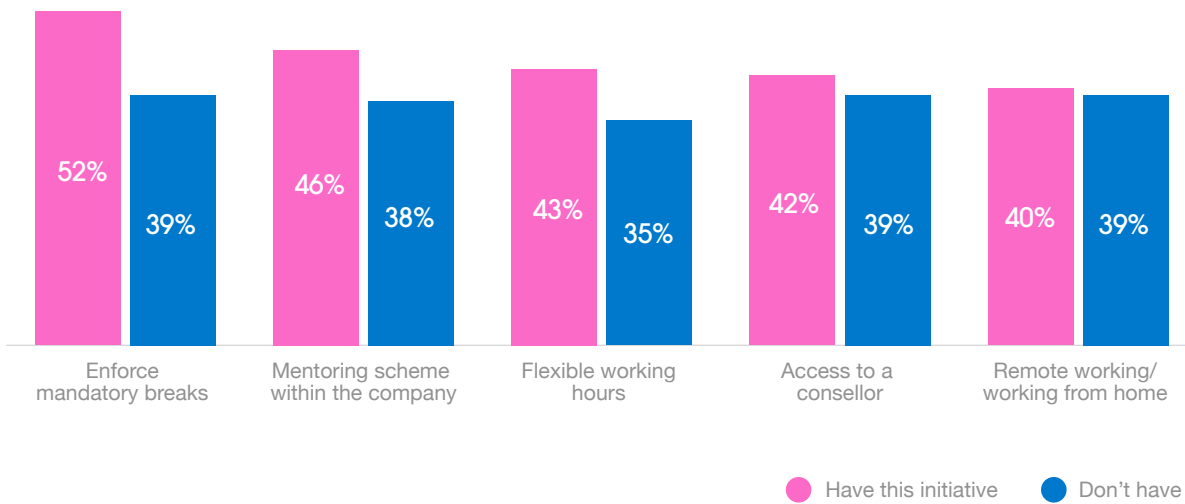
Following our report from last year, there has been a slight increase in the initiatives offered in workplaces and the benefits are clear. Under four in five (75%) workplaces offer remote working or working from home, 37% offer exercise/ recreational classes (vs 31% last year) and 34% offer a mental health first aider (vs 32% last year).

Accessibility to initiatives within the workplace is shown to be a benefit.

Those who have access to enforced mandatory breaks are more likely to have an above average WEMWBS than those without access; of those who do, 52% have an above average score compared to 39% who don't. Flexible working hours is also key. Of those with access 43% have an above average score compared to 35% without access.



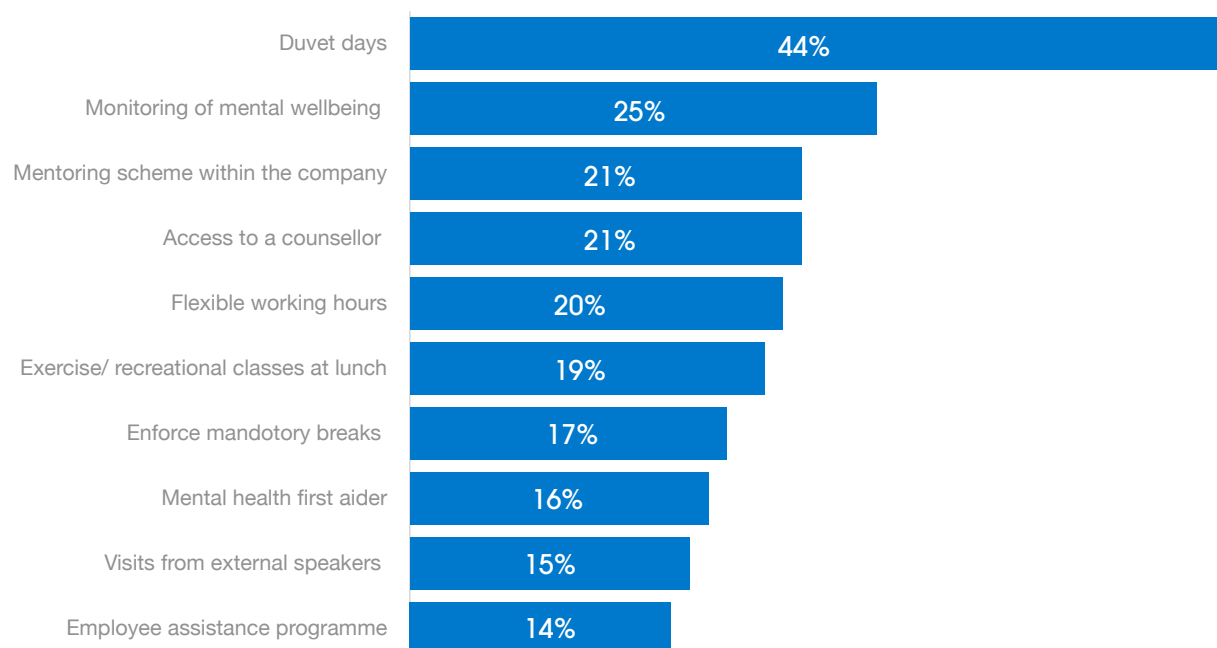
% who have above average mental wellbeing by initiatives they have access to



Room for more

There is a demand from employees for companies to offer more initiatives. Two fifths (44%) say they would like duvet days (only 6% say their workplaces offer this currently) and 21% would like access to a counsellor and a mentoring scheme. We recommend offering a variety of initiatives which will aid in improving the mental wellbeing of employees.

Initiatives employees would like to see their workplace introduce



3. LEARN FROM THE LOCKDOWN

One of the major responses to the pandemic was the lockdown which required employees to work from home if possible. The market research industry was already well placed to do so, with many workers already working from home (WfH) in some capacity before the outbreak of the virus; 61% of employees work from home at some point with only 14% saying they aren't allowed to by their employer.

It's no surprise then that 99% of employees in the industry are currently working from home. Our findings show that there have been huge benefits from doing so and employees want to see some changes remain. However, the picture has not been perfect for everyone, with some finding the experience a challenge. As we come out of lockdown, employers should try to learn from the experience and maintain practices that have been beneficial to employees. They must also recognise that the experience of the crisis varies from person to person – approaching the return to work should put the individual first.

The benefits of working from home

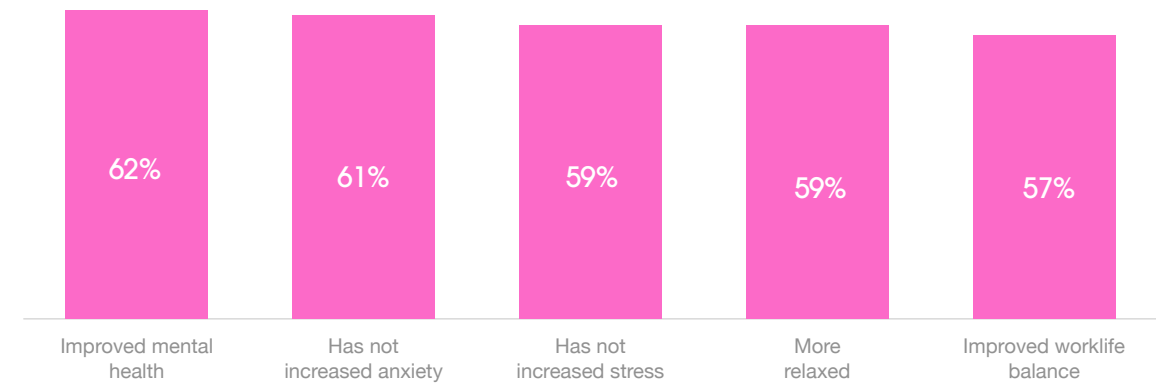
Looking at those that worked from home before the pandemic there is evidence of a correlation between working from home and higher WEMWBS.

Type of working from home	WEMWBS score
All of the time	47.8
Some of the time	46.5
Don't work from home but employer allows it	45.1
Employer does not allow working from home	45

Considering the correlation between WfH and a better WEMWBS score, it no surprise that many reported a number of benefits to WfH during the lockdown. For example, 62% say not having to commute has improved their mental health and 59% say they are more relaxed.

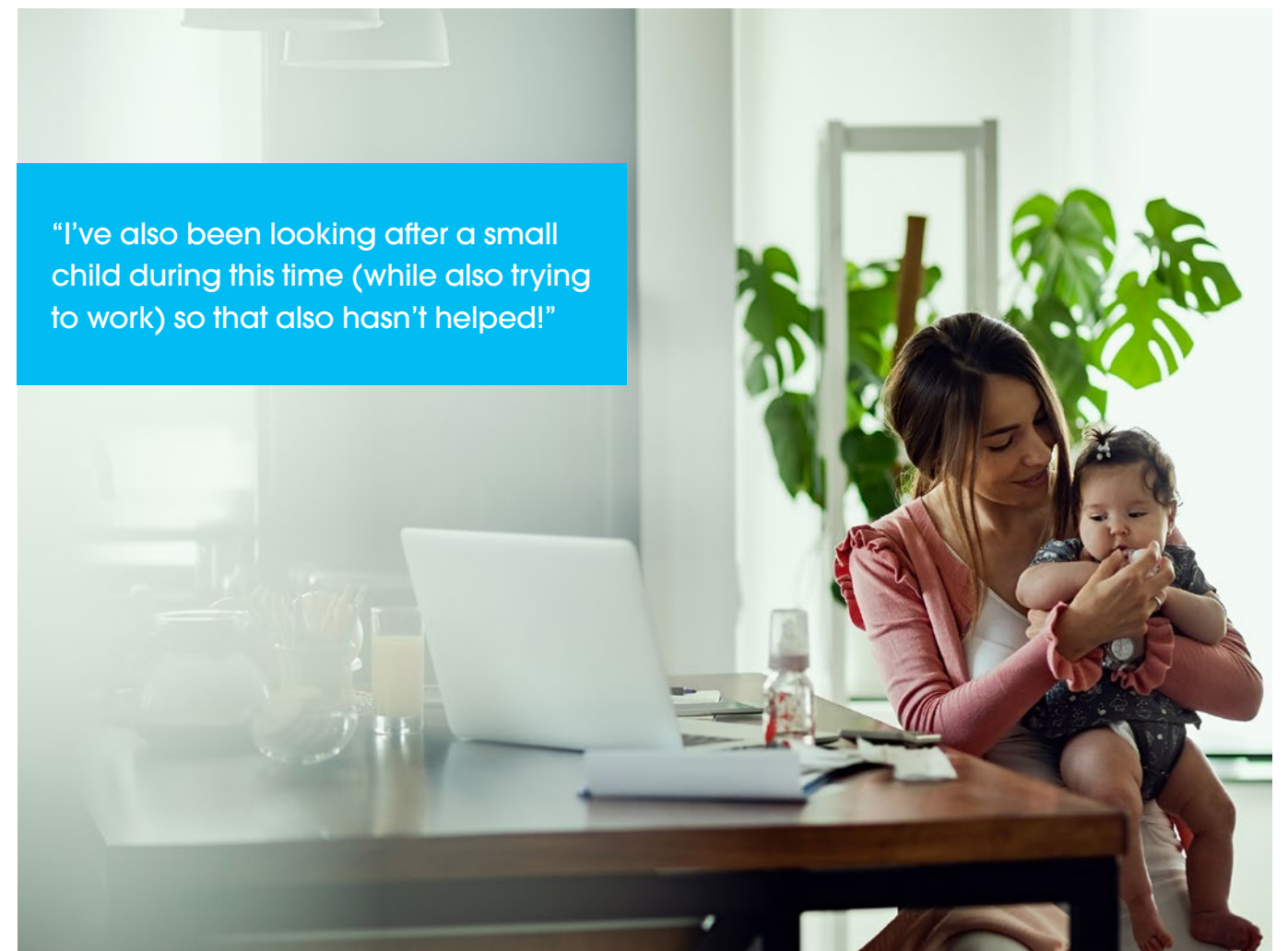


Benefits of working from home during lockdown

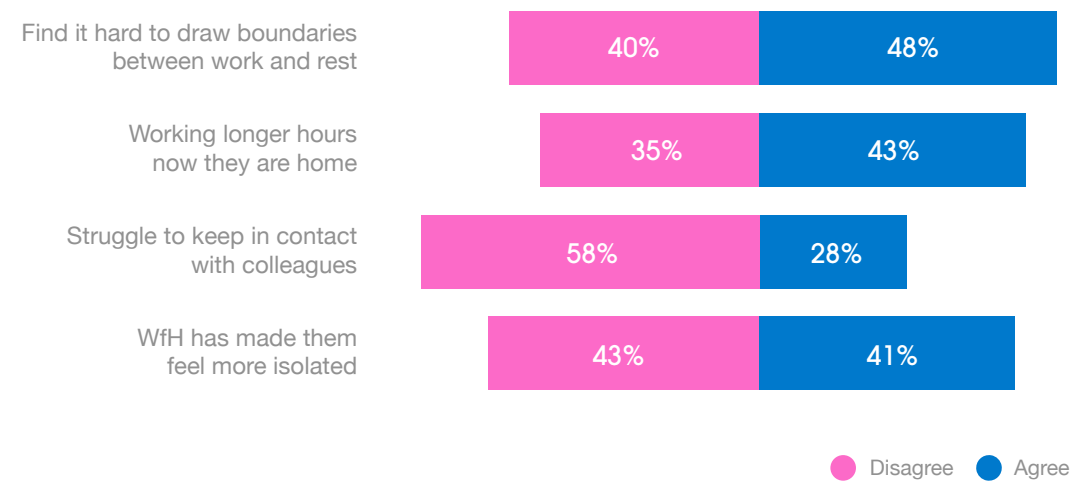


But not everything has been easy

Elsewhere the picture is also positive, although not as clear cut. As the figures below show in some cases there is a significant minority who are finding aspects of working from home during the lockdown a challenge. For example, whilst 58% don't have an issue, 28% say they find it harder to keep in contact with colleagues. Similarly, 48% say they find it hard to draw boundaries between work and rest.



Not everything about lockdown has been positive



So although there are some clear benefits to working from home, like feeling more relaxed and being free from the bad parts of commuting, there are also downsides, notably feelings of disconnect and isolation. Indeed, there is some division of the effects of working from home during lockdown; whilst 37% say it has improved their mental wellbeing, 33% say the opposite. Those who have found it negatively affecting their mental health cited a number of pressures including the threat of unemployment, loneliness, or the stresses of looking after small children.

“As someone who lives alone, it has been a lonely experience (no amount of zoom, skype, Teams, webex calls can make up for the lack of human interaction)”

Nonetheless, an overwhelming 96% want to continue working from in some capacity when lockdown is over.

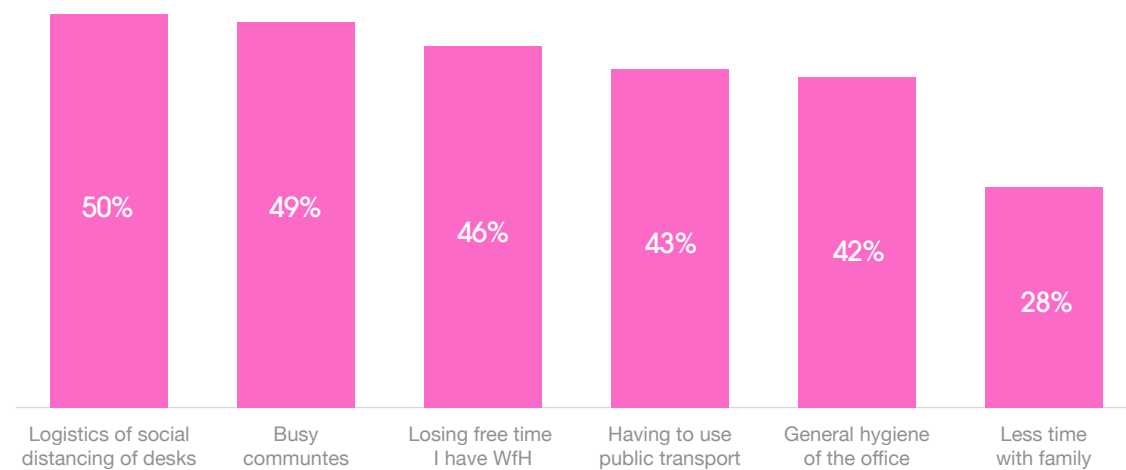
“I find it very helpful to have the structure of getting up and going to work, being in the office around my colleagues, interacting with them, and then physically leaving the office to some home. Also I live in a very small flat with my partner who is also working from home - it is very cramped and uncomfortable, which just makes the days more difficult.”

Returning to office life

When it comes to concerns that people have about returning, the greatest concerns are around the practicalities of social distancing as the chart below shows. Employees will need to ensure that as we start to return to work, they reassure their staff that the necessary precautions are in place.



Concerns about returning to work



CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, the last twelve months have been positive for the industry in regards to mental wellbeing, despite Covid-19. Attitudes are changing for the better and employees are feeling more comfortable communicating issues around mental health. However, whilst things are moving in the right direction there is still lots of work to do to until we reach a place where mental wellbeing is treated the same way we treat physical wellbeing.

Determining whether the next twelve months will see these positive trends continue is made all the more difficult by the ongoing pandemic. There are numerous ways in which the crisis will impact workers from the added anxiety of the virus itself to the potential for future job losses. Indeed, our findings show that 46% say they are anxious about returning to work and 45% are reluctant to go back.

Similarly, the impact of coronavirus on the company was one of the key causes of stress at work (40%). Employers should strongly consider how this is affecting the health and wellbeing of their employees. The good news is many feel the pandemic has helped in terms of discussing mental wellbeing.

"We are supportive of each other and I told a colleague when she asked how I was. I think the Corona Virus has made us more open with each other to some extent - about the range of emotions and difficulties we are each experiencing - although more disconnected from each other in terms of seeing the whole company as much"

"Someone senior was recently hospitalised due to burnout, and so there is a focus on this subject at the moment, and especially due to Coronavirus too - in fact I've been impressed with senior management response to this overall. For me personally, it's more a case of 'well we're all in the same boat'. I would say we share to a certain extent, but perhaps not the worst situations, for fear of looking foolish or having work taken away."

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



AUTHORS



Sophie Holland

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

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Raven works on a variety of projects utilising both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to help clients better understand consumer attitudes and behaviours. Raven is heavily involved in the brand and comms and thought leadership spaces and more recently, she has been involved in financial research, helping clients track monthly trends.

About Opinium

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