

employee benefits

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Holistic health

A supportive culture is vital for mental and physical wellness

Despite wellness being a hot topic in many workplaces, and more focus being placed on employee wellbeing than ever before, there is still a stigma surrounding mental health.

Guidance published in March 2018 by NHS Employers, *Rapid access to treatment and rehabilitation for NHS staff*, found that one in four employees are affected by conditions such as depression and anxiety.

However, many are still reluctant to talk about it; in fact, only 13% of workers would feel comfortable discussing their mental health at work, according to a December 2017 survey by Time to Change.

There are many factors in the workplace that can impact an employee's mental health, such as long or inflexible working hours, a high-pressure environment, or a high workload. External factors, such as home life or physical health problems, can also take their toll.

Poor mental health is responsible for more than half of all sickness absence in the UK, costing employers £8.4 billion per year, plus an additional £15.1 billion in reduced productivity, according to *Mental health in the workplace*, published by Acas in 2017.

This is an issue that organisations simply cannot afford to ignore.

For employers, the need for an effective wellbeing strategy should be clear: as well as having a duty of care, by improving staff wellbeing, organisations can expect to see tangible benefits for the business, such as reduced absenteeism, increased productivity and, as a result, a positive impact on the bottom line.

As one size does not fit all, finding the correct solution should be based on an organisation's need, size and budget.

Although in many cases, the root cause of an employee's poor mental health is beyond the control of an employer, creating an open, supportive culture and

promoting good mental health at work is vital across all sectors and industries.

To do this, employers should encourage regular, informal one-to-ones with line managers to discuss an employee's stresses or concerns. Staff should feel as if their wellbeing is valued above anything else.

However, while employers should gently encourage employees to open up about their mental health, it is important not to push people out of their comfort zones. A wellbeing benefit that offers private, discreet options, such as a 24/7 support helpline or a mental health app, is a great option for those who do not feel comfortable discussing problems face-to-face.

Arthritis UK's 2018 report, *The state of musculo-skeletal health*, showed that depression is four times as common in people experiencing persistent pain. Therefore, an integrated, joined-up approach dealing with physical and mental health in tandem is the way to go.

By offering preventative wellbeing tools such as on-demand physiotherapy advice, access to a 24/7 counselling and support helpline and money back on everyday healthcare costs, organisations can provide employees with the right tools to stay well and prevent the knock-on effect of one health issue leading to another.

In turn, training managers to recognise symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression, such as becoming withdrawn or being absent from work more frequently, means that they are better equipped to offer early intervention support to struggling employees, and can guide them towards appropriate professional help if necessary.

By putting prevention and early intervention at the heart of its wellbeing strategy, a business can expect to see a positive financial impact, as well as a healthier, happier and more productive workforce 

Editor's comment

Debbie Lovewell-Tuck | editor
Employee Benefits

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This year marks the 21st anniversary of *Employee Benefits'* Healthcare research. During that time, the industry has seen numerous shifts in attitudes to employee health and what organisations offer to support it.

One of the biggest changes has been in how some areas of healthcare benefits are perceived. When we first launched this research, for example, wellbeing was seen very much as a fluffier, softer area, largely due to the challenge of proving a solid return on investment (ROI). Benefits strategies were much more likely to include healthcare benefits, such as private medical insurance (PMI), for which a tangible ROI was easier to prove.

Over the years, however, employers have increasingly embraced employee wellbeing, recognising the positive impact that doing so can have on factors such as recruitment, retention, loyalty and productivity, to name but a few. This is reflected in the fact that 11 of the top 20 core health benefits offered by respondents now fall into the category of wellbeing support.

A growing acceptance of the advantages of supporting employee wellbeing is also apparent in the increased importance employers now place on mental health; about four-fifths (79%) now offer relevant support for employees, up from 67% just two years ago. This is reflective of the wider societal trend that has seen conversations open up around mental health issues.

When it comes to introducing, or continuing to offer, any type of benefit, the pressure to justify expenditure and present a robust business case is one HR decision-makers will almost certainly be all too familiar with. It is surprising, then, that the proportion of respondents that claim not to know how much the provision of healthcare benefits costs their organisation has gradually risen over the past few years; this year, two-fifths (41%) say this is the case.

Yet, despite this, reasonable cost remains the largest influence on respondents' decision to buy, or continue to offer, healthcare benefits. This has been the case for the past 13 years, and is only likely to increase as budgets tighten.

As we move towards uncertain times, it will be interesting to see what the future holds for workplace health and wellbeing [eb](#)



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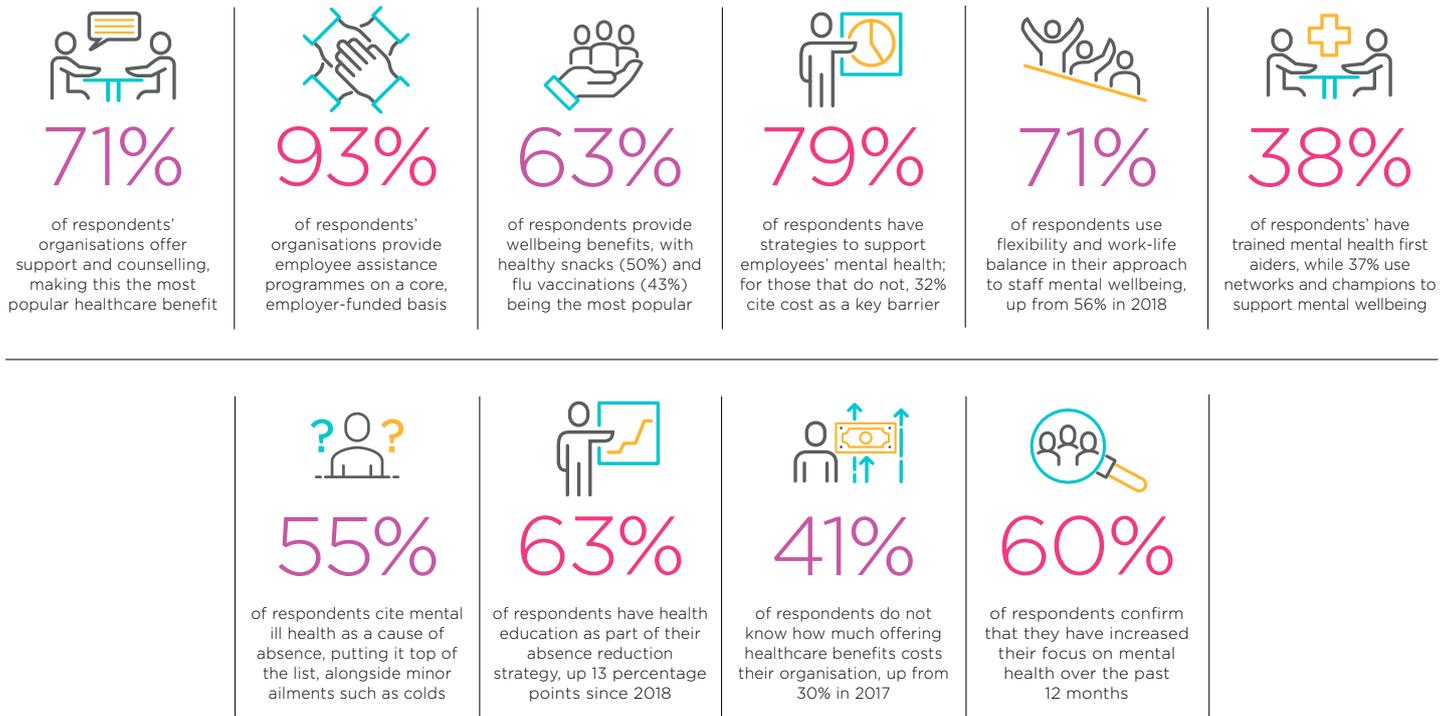
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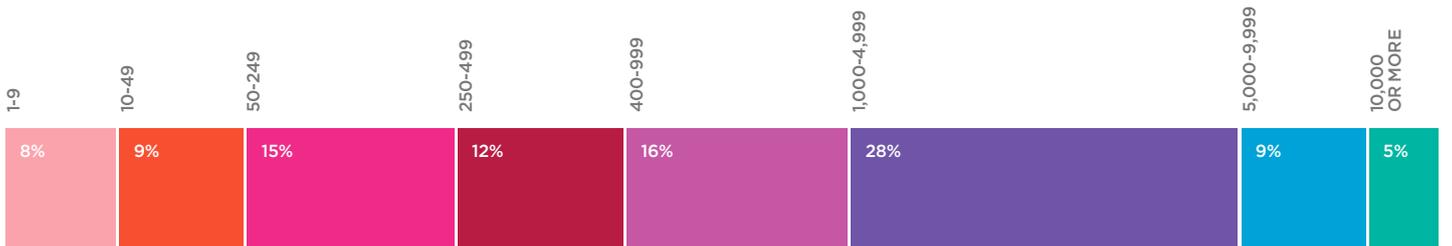


Key findings

The survey, which was conducted in July 2019 among readers of www.employeebenefits.co.uk, received 202 responses. Respondents are involved in the purchase of healthcare benefits at their organisation, either as a primary decision maker or decision influencer.



Number of employees in respondents' organisations



Sample: All respondents

Respondents' organisation type



Sample: All respondents

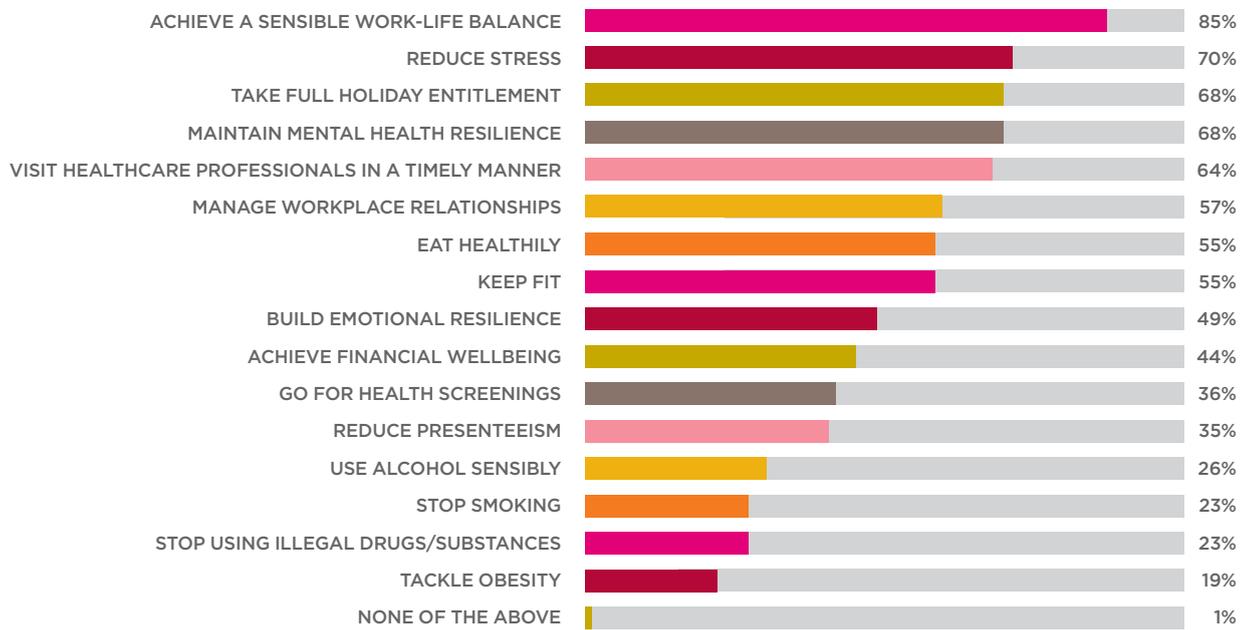
Strategy

Healthcare benefits are successful in helping employers be seen in a positive light



Debbie Lovewell-Tuck | editor
Employee Benefits

What respondents believe their organisation has a duty of care to encourage employees to do



Sample: All respondents (152)

For the 14th consecutive year, the majority (85%) of respondents believe they have a duty of care to encourage employees to achieve a sensible work-life balance.

Helping employees to reduce stress (70%), guiding them to visit healthcare professionals in a timely manner (64%), ensuring they take their full holiday entitlement (68%) and aiding them

to maintain mental health resilience (68%) have also consistently remained among respondents' top obligations towards their employees.

Do respondents offer an integrated wellness strategy incorporating physical, mental, emotional and financial wellbeing?



Sample: All respondents (109)

The proportion of respondents that offer an integrated wellness strategy, incorporating physical, mental, emotional and financial wellbeing has changed little since this question was first asked in 2017, despite some slight fluctuations in percentages. This year, 32% take an integrated, holistic approach, compared with 33% in 2018 and 38% in 2017.

The proportion that are planning to move towards an integrated strategy has also remained similarly consistent. All aspects of employee wellbeing have now been proven to impact key

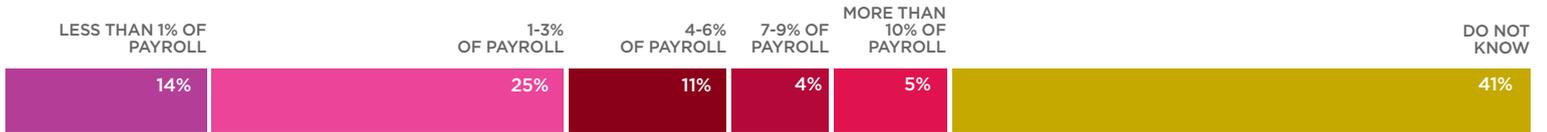
business issues. Furthermore, the impact of one area of wellbeing on another, for example the toll financial stress can take on mental and even physical wellness, suggests that employers that take an inclusive approach are likely to see considerable benefits.

Do respondents calculate a return on investment on their healthcare benefits spend?



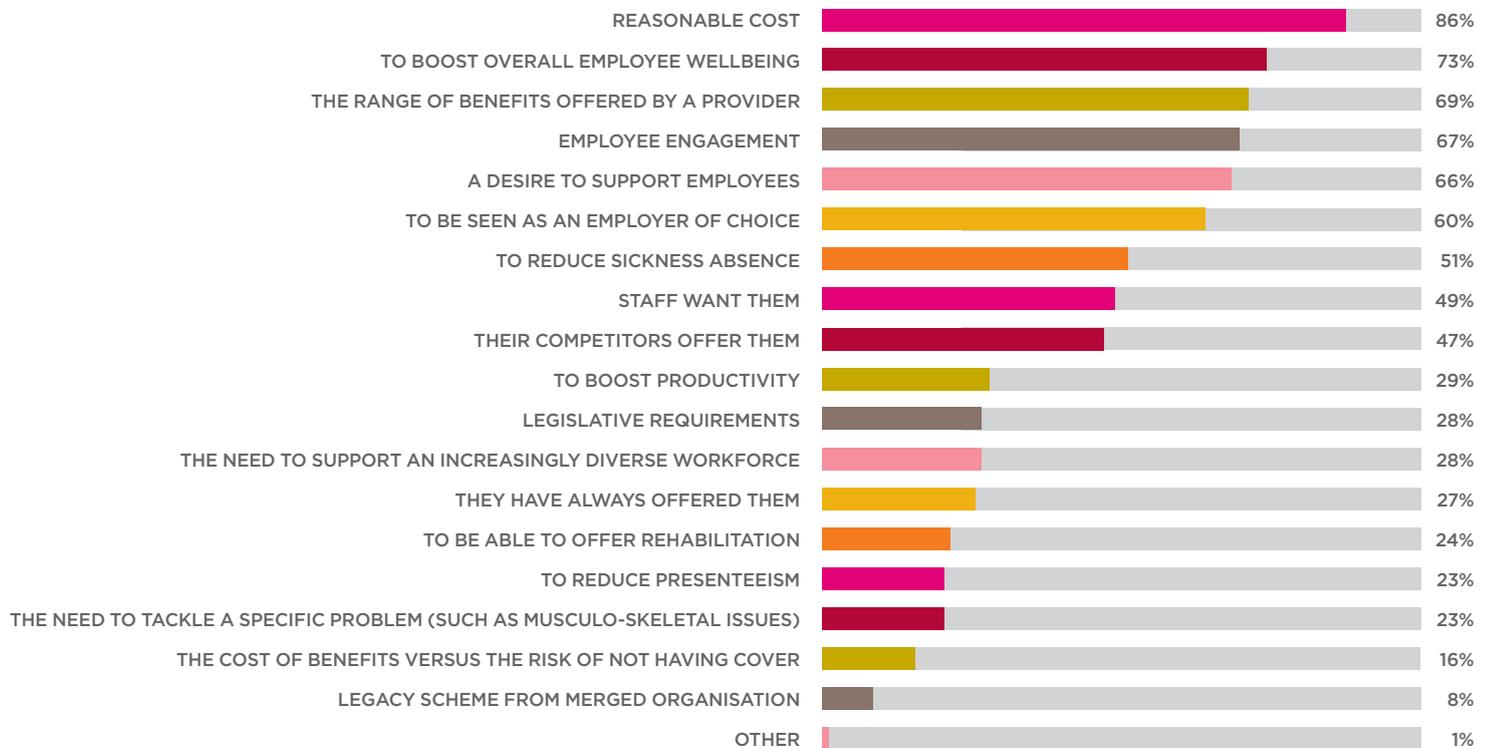
Sample: All respondents (161)

The estimated cost to respondents of providing healthcare benefits



Sample: All respondents (100)

The factors that influence respondents' decisions to buy, or continue to offer, healthcare benefits



Sample: All respondents (177)

Two-fifths (41%) of respondents do not know how much providing healthcare benefits is estimated to cost their organisation; this proportion has risen gradually over the past few years, having stood at 30% in 2017.

Among those that are aware of the costs, respondents' approximate healthcare spend has remained relatively consistent over the years. This year, 14% stated that they spend less than 1% of payroll, while 25% spend 1-3%. This compares with the 20% that spent less than 1% of payroll and 30% that spent 1-3% of payroll in 2013, for example.

Reasonable cost has remained the largest influencer on respondents' decision to buy, or continue to offer, benefits since this question was first asked back in 2006. This is hardly surprising, given the broader economic backdrop and the mounting pressure on organisations to either reduce or justify expenditure.

For the second consecutive year, the range of benefits offered by a provider is the next biggest influence below cost. This factor has risen steadily in importance in recent years, overtaking elements such as employee engagement, respondents' desire to support employees, and a wish to be seen as an employer of choice.

This year, 69% base their benefits decisions on a provider's product range, compared to 75% that did the same in 2018 and 51% in 2017. A desire to streamline the benefits offering or an awareness of the efficiencies of scale may be behind this trend.

Given employers' often considerable spend on healthcare benefits, the proportion that measure their return on investment (ROI) in this area remains surprisingly low.

It is reassuring, therefore, that the proportion that say they are planning to begin doing so continues to rise. This year, a third (33%) are planning to begin tracking ROI, up from 28% last year and 19% in 2017. >

What respondents feel their healthcare benefits have been successful in achieving



Sample: All respondents (133)

This year, being seen as a 'caring' employer returns to the top of the list when respondents consider what their healthcare benefits programmes have been successful in achieving. Almost seven in 10 (69%) said this was the case this year, compared to 60% last year and 74% in 2017.

This focus on external image and brand may well reflect the issues faced when recruiting within an increasingly healthy employment market, which has created a more competitive war for talent, in which potential employees have the freedom to compare and consider an organisation's culture and social impact.

Over the past few years, being seen in a positive light has consistently comprised one of the top three achievements of respondents' healthcare benefits, alongside improving the health and welfare of staff (63%), and providing a duty of care (55%). However, achieving good employee

engagement has gradually been superseded by other factors, slipping out of the top three into fourth place this year. The proportion reporting that their healthcare benefits have been successful in helping staff to return to work as soon as possible has fluctuated over the past couple of years. This year, 49% have achieved this, compared with 43% in 2018 and 53% in 2017; this may be reflective of the varied conditions behind employees' absence.

What respondents would like their healthcare provider to be able to do



Sample: All respondents (157)

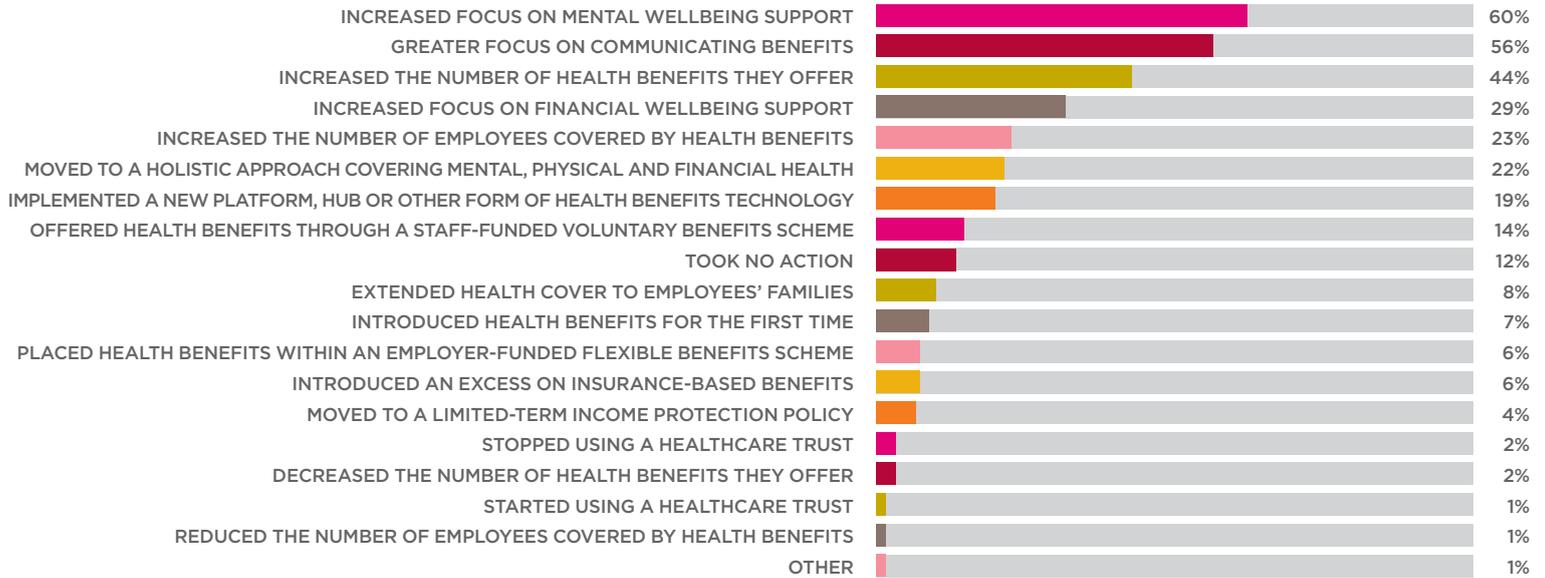
Unsurprisingly, most respondents state they would like their healthcare provider to improve either their employees' mental health (91%) or their physical health (84%); after all, this is likely to be the ultimate driver behind the decision to invest in such benefits.

A high proportion also appear to be looking to their provider for support in providing education for employees, with 70% saying they would like a product to deliver meaningful content to support staff wellbeing, and 69% desiring help in increasing engagement with benefits.

Data is now available in such vast quantities that its use is rising up the agenda, and employers may be seeking support in obtaining meaningful analysis. This is reflected in the research, which

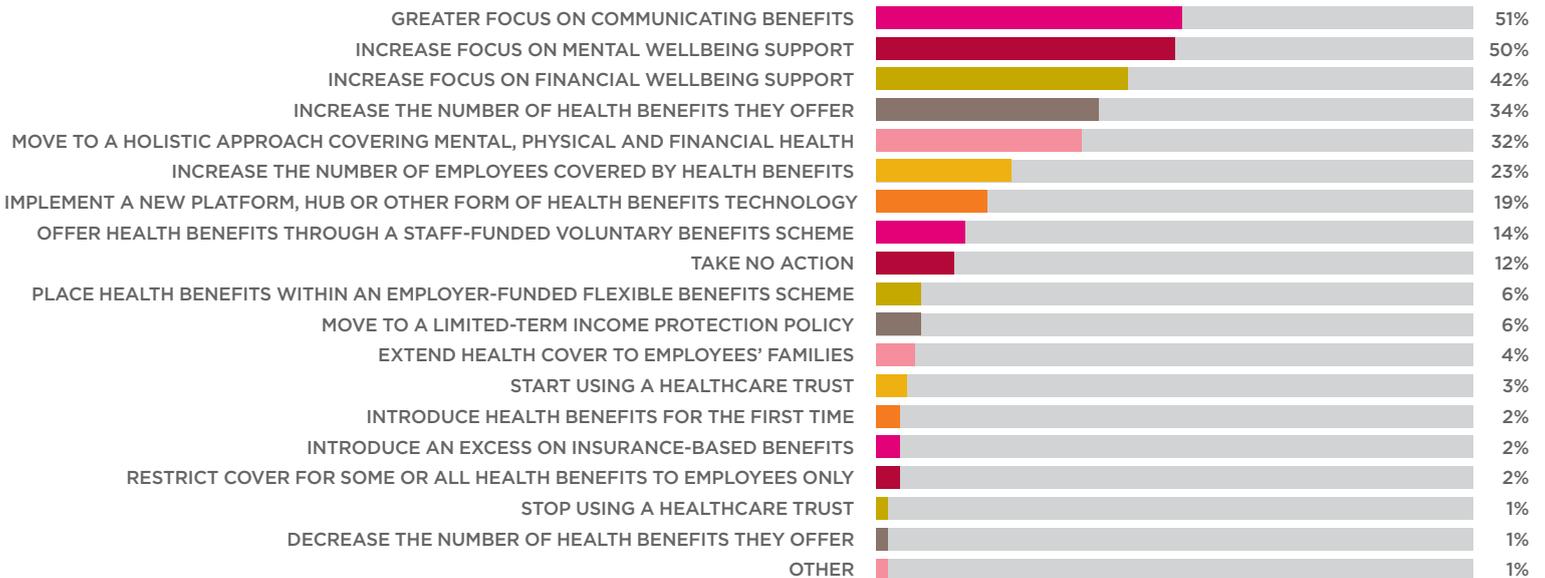
found that 60% of respondents would like their provider to supply insights on the use of their benefits. A further 48% would like an analysis of wellbeing strategy to be used to provide services to support their needs. Where data is used in such a way, it enables employers to offer a more tailored benefits strategy, which may lead to a better ROI.

The actions respondents have taken in relation to health benefits in the past 12 months



Sample: All respondents (124)

The actions respondents are likely to take in relation to health benefits in the next 12 months



Sample: All respondents (115)

During last year's research, 45% of respondents stated that they intended to place an increased focus on mental wellbeing support; a year on, 60% stated they have actually done so. With a further 50% of respondents intending to take the same approach next year, it will be interesting to see the results of this in 12 months' time.

The rise in focus on mental wellbeing means that, despite continuing to rise in popularity itself, going from 41% in 2018 to 56% in 2019, communicating benefits has been overtaken as the most common action taken over the past 12 months. Far from slipping off the agenda, however, 51% plan to put a greater emphasis on communication over the coming year, placing it top of the list of future priorities. Given the costs involved in providing healthcare benefits to staff, ensuring they are aware of, and willing to engage with, the initiatives and products can be key to optimising ROI.

As health, wellbeing and the links to engagement and productivity become ever more prevalent among employers, it is perhaps unsurprising that 44% have increased the number of health benefits they offer over the past 12 months, with a further 34% planning to do the same in the

coming year. An increasing focus on financial wellbeing support also remains high on the agenda among those employers that have already taken action, as well as those that are planning to do so.

Although the percentages have fluctuated slightly, these trends are all broadly in line with those in 2018 and 2017. However, a noticeable change year on year is the proportion of respondents that have taken no action around their health benefits. Just 12% reported this was the case this year, compared with 25% in 2018 and 27% in 2017 ^{eb}

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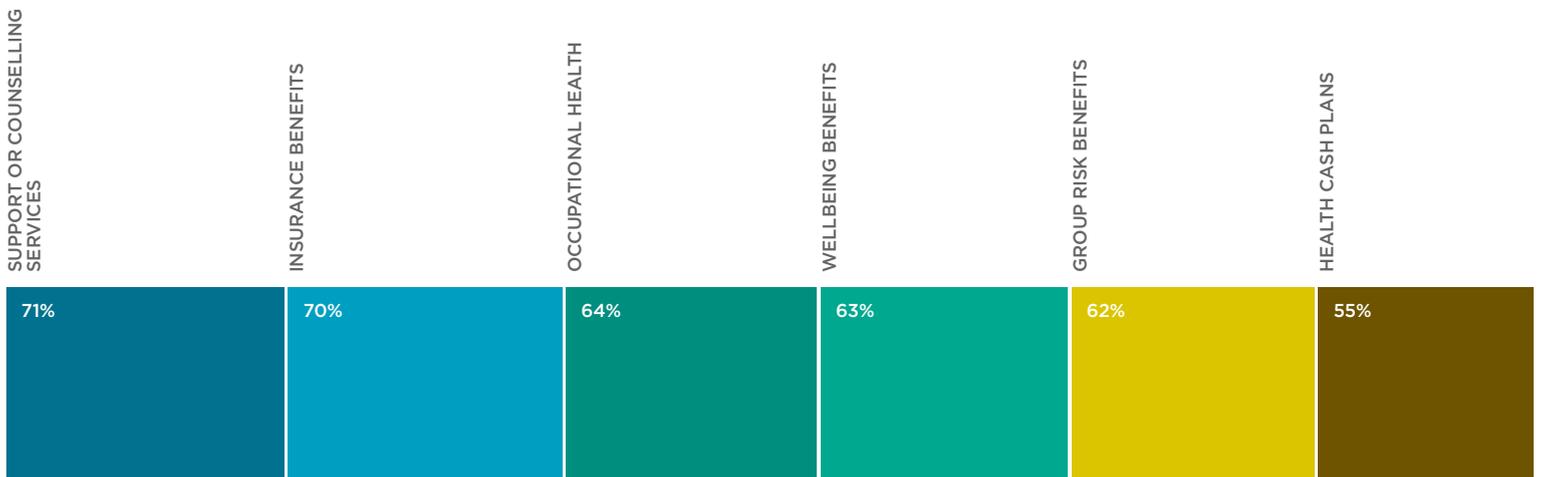
Benefits offered

Support or counselling services remain the most popular healthcare benefit



Katie Scott | reporter
Employee Benefits

The types of health benefits respondents provide to some or all staff



Sample: All respondents (107)

Support and counselling services remain the most popular type of healthcare benefit in 2019, with seven in 10 (71%) employers offering something in this category. This type of benefit has remained in the top spot for three consecutive years.

When drilling down into the specific benefits being offered by organisations, employee assistance programmes (EAPs) are by far the most common overall, offered by 93% of respondents on a core basis, which is a considerable improvement on the 43% that did so when this research was conducted in 2013.

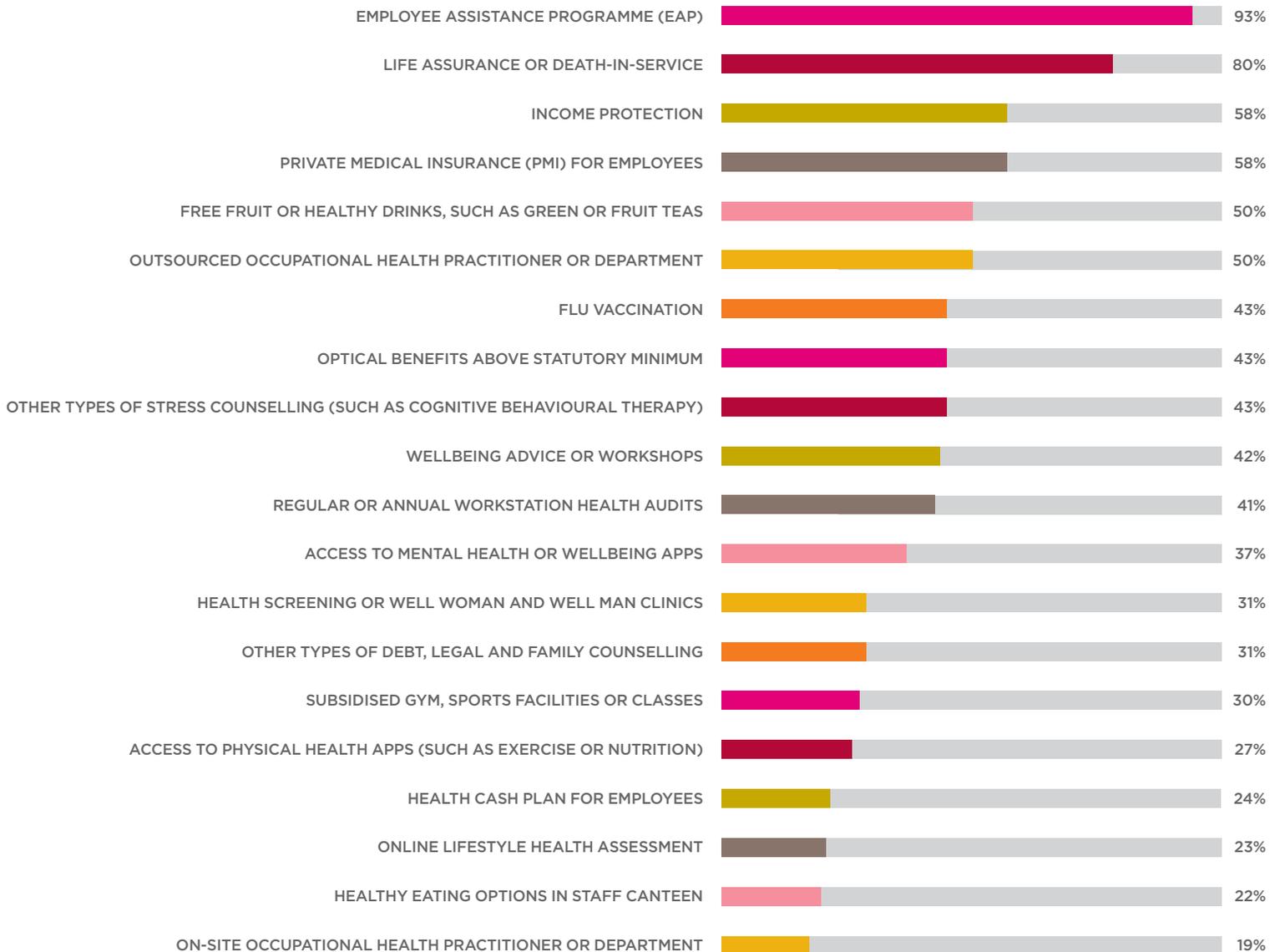
Meanwhile, stress counselling, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), is provided by 43%, more than doubling since 2007, when this stood at 21%. Other types of debt, legal or family counselling are made available as a core benefit by 31% of respondents. These have also risen in popularity by nine percentage points as a flexible benefit since last year.

The second most popular category is insurance, offered by 70% of respondents. This is an increase on the 59% that provided insurance benefits in 2018. Almost three-fifths (58%) of employers offer private medical insurance (PMI) on a core basis to employees in 2019. This has become increasingly common over the years, as in 2001, PMI was only offered to staff on a core basis by 24% of surveyed organisations.

Meanwhile, 16% extend this provision to their dependants. This makes the extension of PMI to family members the second most common core healthcare insurance benefit, above products such as dental insurance for employees (14%) and personal accident insurance for employees (18%).

Despite the overall proportion of employers offering group risk products increasing by 13 percentage points since 2018, some of the benefits in this category have seen a decline in popularity in the past year. For example, although the majority (80%) offer life assurance or death-in-service on a core basis in 2019, this is a drop from the 90% that did so in 2018. >

The top 20 health benefits offered on a core (employer-funded) basis by respondents



Sample: All respondents (104)

More than half (58%) of respondents currently provide staff with income protection, which represents a 15 percentage point decrease from 73% in 2018. Critical illness has also seen a decline in popularity year on year, with 17% of organisations providing this as a core benefit in 2019, versus 25% in 2018.

Declines in these areas may reflect an increased focus on wellbeing benefits, which have seen an 11 percentage point growth in popularity since 2018.

This trend is illustrated by a 10 point increase in the number of subsidised gym, sports facilities or classes (30%) being offered by employers, and a seven percentage point rise in access to mental health or wellbeing apps (37%).

The fact that 11 of the top 20 core healthcare benefits fall into the category of wellbeing support perhaps reflects the wide range of initiatives both available to, and actively offered by, employers.

Nevertheless, some wellbeing benefits decreased in popularity between 2018 and 2019, most notably the provision of online lifestyle health assessments, which has dropped from 34% to 23%.

In terms of core occupational health benefits, 50% of respondents' organisations provide an outsourced practitioner or department; this shows a sharp decrease since 2018, when this stood at 63%.

Health cash plans are lowest on the list of healthcare benefit categories for 2019, despite appearing in the middle of the table last year. Since 2018, the provision of cash plans for employees has dropped from 43% to 24% as a core benefit, and from 32% to 24% as part of a voluntary offering; for the latter, this sees a return to the level seen as far back as 2007 ^{eb}

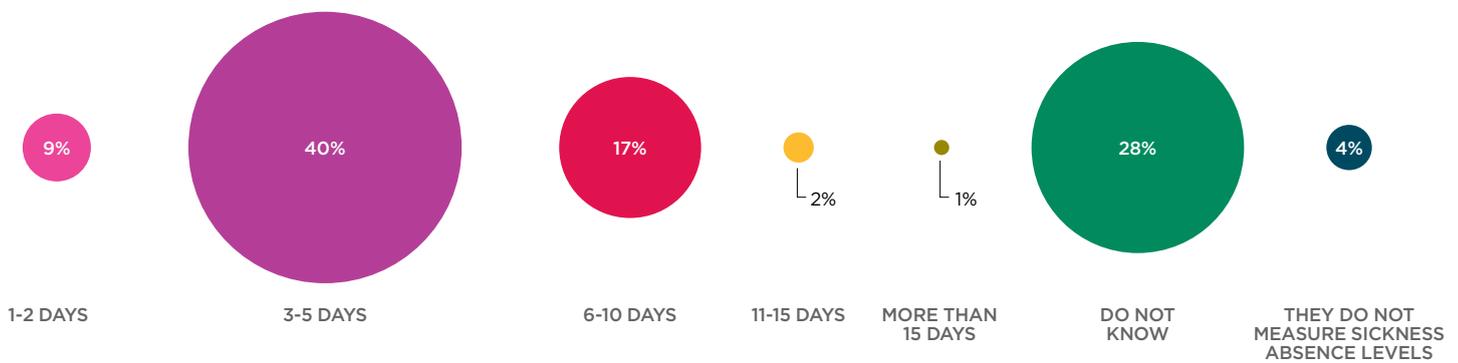
Sickness absence

Mental health issues and minor ailments are the main causes of sickness absence among employees



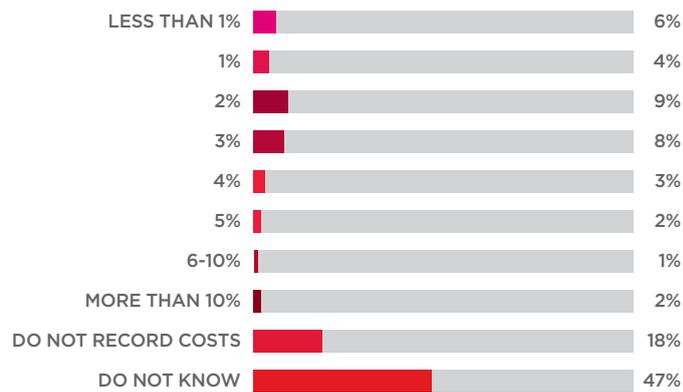
Jessica Bird | deputy editor
Employee Benefits

The number of days of sickness absence employees in respondents' organisations take on average per year



Sample: All respondents (113)

The percentage of payroll that absence costs respondents' organisations per annum (including cost of temporary staff, loss of production time, and so on)



Sample: All respondents (112)

Overall, 32% of respondents are either unsure of, or do not actively measure, their organisation's sickness absence levels. A further 65% either do not know or do not record what percentage of payroll is represented by sickness absence cost per year.

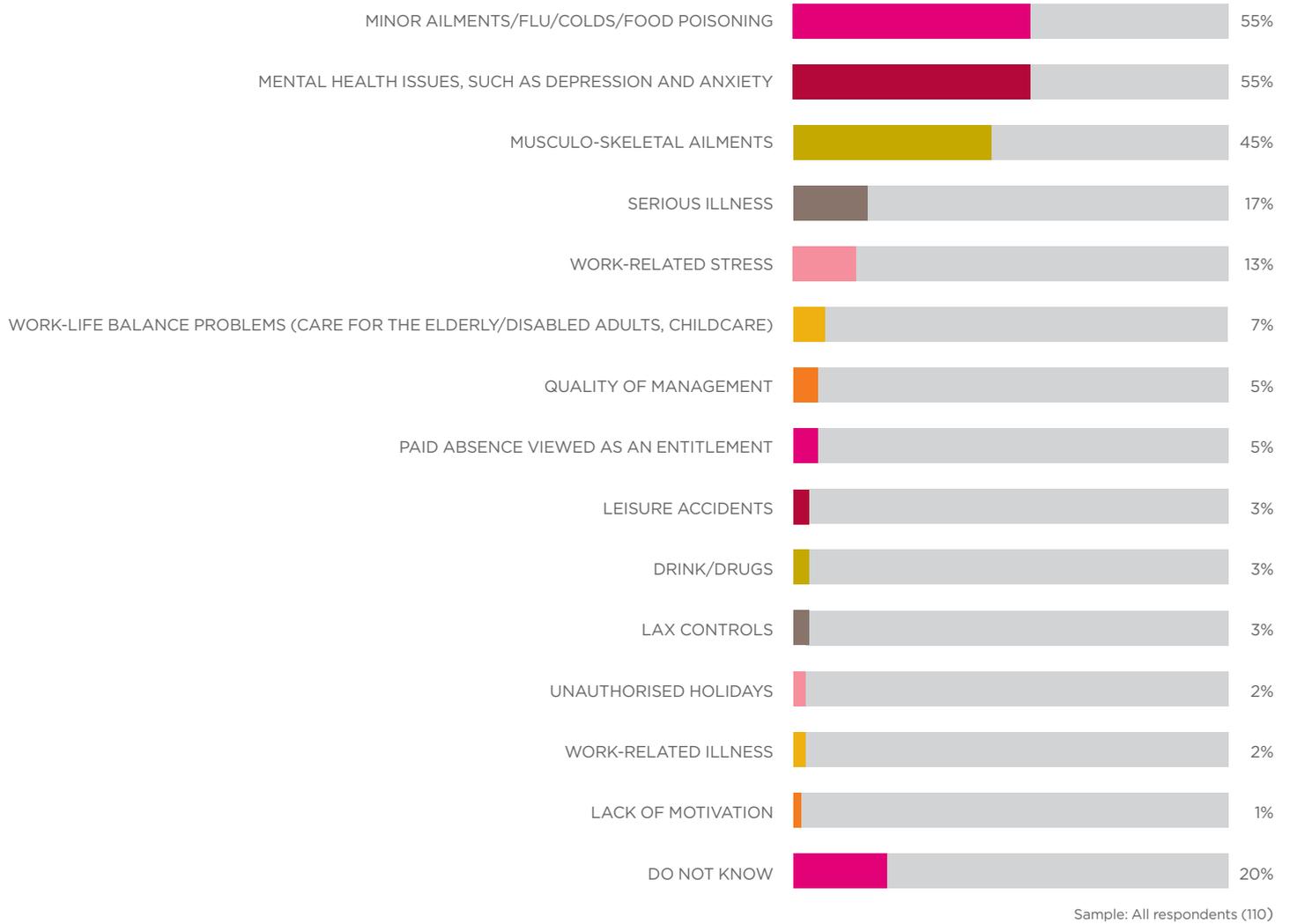
In both instances, this is an increase on the figures from 2018, but considering the results over time, there has been little great change; for example, 32% did not measure sickness absence in 2013, and 30% did not in 2017.

Two-fifths (40%) of organisations that do track sickness absence see an average of between three and five days per employee each year, with a sharp drop off before the next highest options, six to 10 days per year (17%) and one to two days (9%). These figures remain roughly in line with

last year, suggesting that levels of sickness absence have not changed substantially.

Among those employers that do measure the cost of sickness absence to their organisation, most report that these costs total 3% or less of payroll each year. This marks little change year on year. The proportion that cite absence costs of 5% of payroll, however, has fallen by nine percentage points this year. >

The major causes of sickness absence in respondents' organisations



Following a dip in last year's research, musculo-skeletal ailments have risen overall as a cause of sickness absence, cited by 45% of respondents, an increase of 15 percentage points since 2018, and seven since 2017.

Despite the rising prominence of this form of health problem, however, the most common issues continue to be minor ailments (55%), such as colds, as well as mental health issues (55%). For the first year, these two options stand jointly as the most common, cementing a trend that has seen mental health issues steadily rise as a cause of absence over several years. Perhaps as part of this same trend, work-related stress has increased from 3% in 2018 to 13% this year.

This suggests that issues with mental health resilience may be growing among the UK workforce; however, this trend might equally represent a growing culture of openness, in which employees are more likely to report absences as relating to mental health, where previously they might have cited alternative ailments.

The proportion of respondents that have a strategy in place to reduce sickness absence



Sample: All respondents (114)

The format respondents' sickness absence strategy takes



Sample: All respondents with a sickness absence strategy in place (40)

Perhaps reflecting the dynamic and fast-developing nature of this market, there have been some considerable changes this year to respondents' sickness absence strategies. The 2018 research also saw some major shifts, and although the proportion of organisations that have an absence reduction strategy in place (39%) has not shifted since last year, employers do continue to rapidly adapt and change their approach to sickness absence.

For example, while 2018 saw early intervention by line managers take second place on the list of absence strategies, and its popularity has not changed this year, this has been outstripped by other methods and now stands in joint third. Joining line manager intervention in this position is health education, rising an impressive 13 percentage points, from 50% in 2018 to 63% this year.

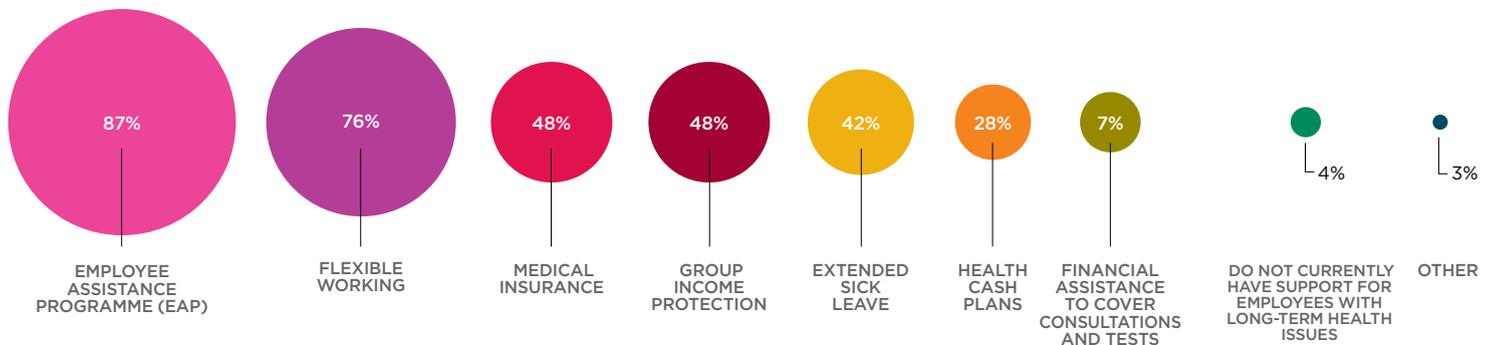
Meanwhile, providing access to care at work or through health benefits and implementing work-life balance strategies have both risen by more than 10 percentage points, with 73% of employers citing their use of each strategy. Remaining solid at the top of the list this year, though, is the use of return-to-work interviews (75%).

Among the other absence reduction approaches that have seen an increase this year is rehabilitation for the long-term sick, which has grown from 41% in 2018 to 58%.

This may demonstrate a reaction to the ageing workforce, as this brings with it an increased need to address longer-term ailments and serious health issues.

Meanwhile, although it saw a significant rise of 21 percentage points between 2017 and 2018, the use of disciplinary procedures to reduce sickness absence has decreased once more, settling at 35% this year.

Methods used to cater for employees with long-term health issues in respondents' organisations



Sample: All respondents (107)

Following the introduction of this question in the 2018 research cycle, the most popular methods of helping those members of staff experiencing long-term health issues have not changed.

Employers continue to make use of employee assistance programmes (EAPs) and flexible-working policies, predominantly. However, while flexible working has only risen in popularity as a

method of helping those with long-term health issues by five percentage points, EAPs have far outstripped this, with 87% of employers providing them, compared to 77% in 2018 ^{eb}

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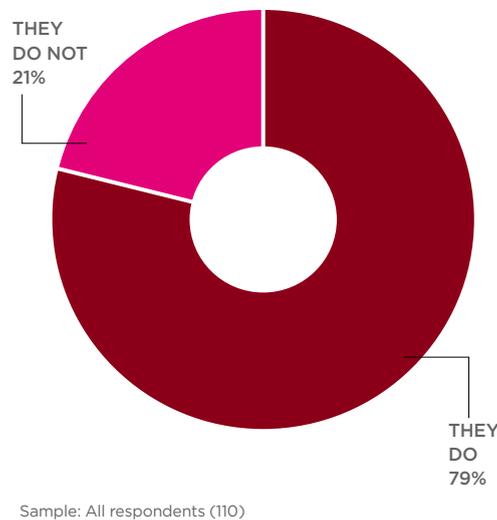
Mental health

Most employers understand the importance of supporting mental wellbeing among employees



Tynan Barton | features editor
Employee Benefits

Do respondents have specific benefits and strategies in place to support employees' mental health in the workplace?



Despite a slight drop in 2018, mental health issues have seen a considerable overall increase in importance for employers over the past few years; 67% offered relevant support to their employees in 2017, which has risen to 79% in this round of research.

Further demonstrating this positive trend, among those respondents whose organisations do not currently offer mental health support benefits, the majority are either aiming to introduce them in the next 12 months (50%), or are in the process of designing a mental health support strategy (41%). In comparison, in 2018, only 29% responded that they planned to introduce relevant supports, while a further 29% were at the design stage.

Among organisations that have yet to introduce mental health support, cost and resources are still the most common barriers. Cost has risen in prominence since 2018, being cited by 32%, compared with 20% last year, whereas lack of resources appears to have decreased as a key barrier, dropping by 20 percentage points since 2018.

Mental health initiatives continue to gain wide support from employers; the Time to Change pledge is a social movement operated by mental health charities Mind and Rethink Mental Illness, and has been adopted by more than 1,175 employers to date. The pledge is a commitment to change the way people think and act about mental health in the workplace. It requires employers to create an action plan of measurable activity to promote positive mental wellbeing.

In 2019, employers including Transport for Wales, TSB, Speed and Gympass all signed the pledge to support employee mental health. As part of its programme, Transport for Wales trained employees in mental health first aid and implemented an employee assistance

programme. TSB's action plan includes mental health awareness training for all employees, and a network of mental health first aiders. It also encourages employees, including senior leaders, to share personal experiences.

PR firm Speed launched a new wellbeing programme to support its commitment to the pledge; this provides its employees with physical and mental wellbeing support, including mental health first aiders, training and regular activities.

Gympass has created a specific mental health policy to help build a culture where staff feel comfortable and supported. It hosts wellness breakfasts and events and has introduced mental health champions across the business.

Other organisations that have signed the Time to Change pledge include British Gas, Transport for London, Royal Mail, Barclays, Marks and Spencer and Shell. >

Among the much larger proportion of respondents that do have mental wellbeing strategies and benefits in place, the most common initiatives have consistently remained the same for the past three years.

Employee assistance programmes (EAPs), flexible working or work-life balance policies, and access to education and guidance for staff are the most commonly offered benefits in this area.

Nearly all (90%) employers offer an EAP as part of their approach to supporting the mental health of staff. As in previous years, this takes the top spot, having been offered by 92% of respondents in 2018 and 97% in 2017.

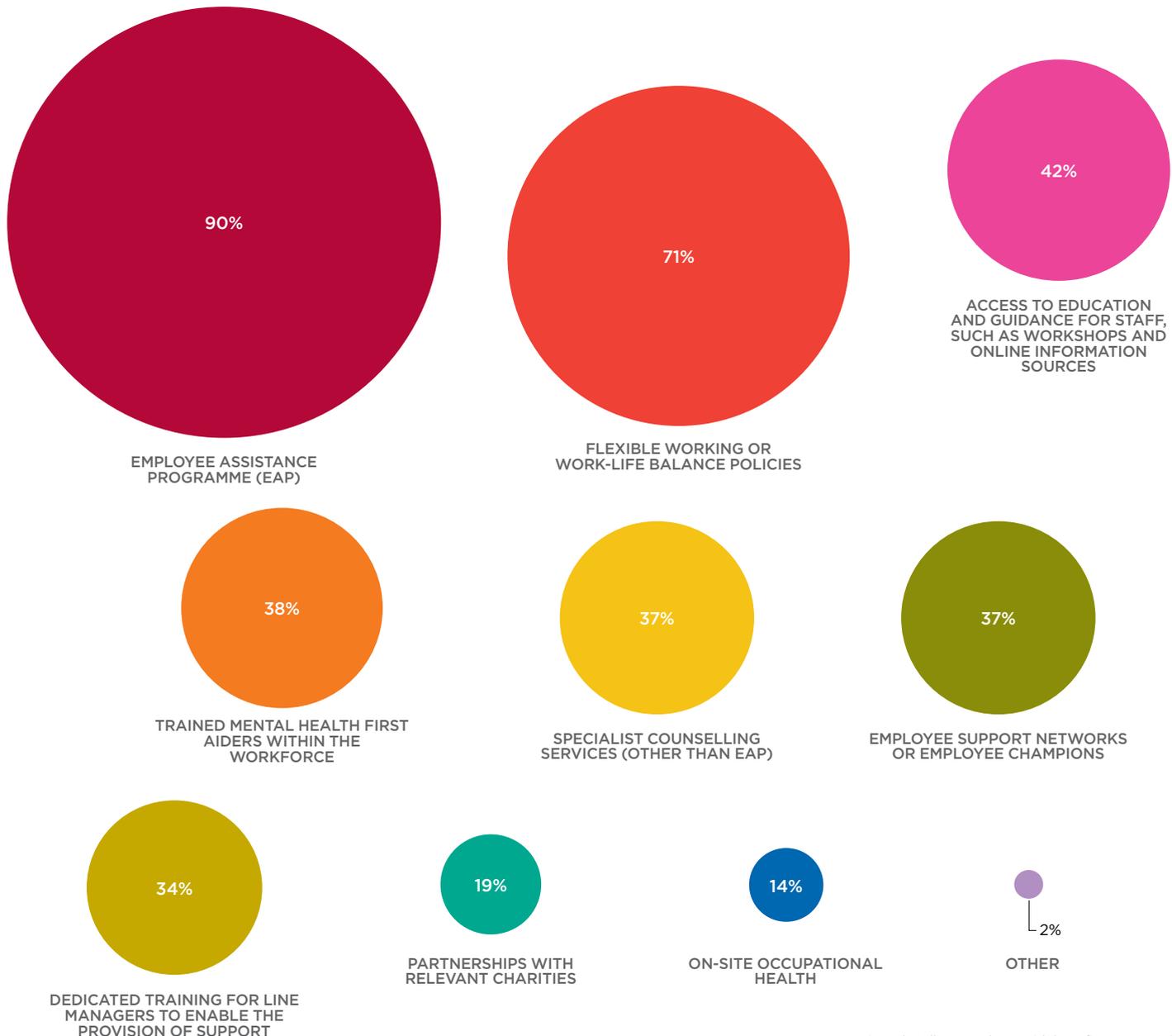
Giving employees the opportunity to work flexibly, or providing other policies centred on boosting work-life balance, has gradually grown in popularity. Nearly three-quarters (71%) offer these initiatives to support employees' mental health, growing from 56% and 61% in 2018 and 2017, respectively.

While flexibility and work-life balance have grown as employers increasingly come to understand the benefits to an organisation, including to productivity and engagement alongside

mental wellbeing, the provision of education and guidance has remained steadily popular, selected as a key method of supporting mental health by about two-fifths of respondents for the past three years.

A new option was added to the survey this year to capture the number of employers that provide trained mental health first aiders within the workforce, an initiative that is growing in popularity. Reflecting this trend, which has seen numerous organisations work to place mental wellbeing alongside physical health and safety on their agendas, 38% currently provide this for employees ^{eb}

The benefits respondents offer to support employees' mental health



Sample: All respondents with benefits or strategies in place to support employees' mental health (86)



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freelance journalist



NEED TO KNOW

- Technology facilitates a more flexible work culture but, if not managed properly, an always-on environment can lead to physical and mental health issues.
- Drastic techniques, such as blanket bans and even legislation, have grown in popularity, but senior managers have a key role to play in setting everyday expectations.
- Technology can also be used for good, such as supporting mental health and wellbeing with mindfulness and meditation apps.

Technology has created the ability to work whenever and wherever. This is a great enabler, giving many employees the flexibility to strike the perfect work-life balance. However, ensuring this remains a benefit and not a health risk is no less difficult for organisations than it is essential.

In an always-on culture, where responding to emails outside of normal working hours or while on holiday is the norm, employee health can suffer dire consequences. As well as causing anxiety and stress, this can also have adverse effects on sleep and relationships.

Kim Horsfall, senior consultant at Howden Employee Benefits and Wellbeing, says: “If employees feel they can’t switch off, it can take its toll on their physical and mental health. As well as exacerbating any existing health issues, it can lead to burnout.”

Being tied to a screen may also have more long-term implications, says Karen Matovu, head of mental health training at Validium. “When someone is constantly distracted by technology, they don’t use parts of the brain that build longer-term memory. Nobody knows how this will affect people when they’re older, but it’s a worrying trend.” With so much at stake, developing a policy that ensures employees have proper downtime is a must.

Several employers have already taken drastic steps in this regard. Volkswagen, for example, bans emails between 6.15pm and 7am, while at Daimler, employees can choose to have incoming emails deleted while they are on holiday.

Governments have also placed reducing digital stressors high on the agenda. In France, as of 2017, employees have a legislated right to disconnect from work-related technology outside of working hours.

The French approach, and that of organisations such as Volkswagen, may send out a strong message, but it may not be the right journey in many circumstances, says Rachel Suff, employee relations adviser at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).



Case study | Silverbean

Silverbean encourages employees to switch off outside work

Over 17 years, digital marketing agency Silverbean has progressed dramatically, from being based out of its founder’s bedroom to employing 56 people in offices in Newcastle, Teeside, and, as of this year, Sydney.

Damian Hall, chief operating officer, is keen to ensure that staff are supported as much as possible. “We have fully flexible working arrangements: as long as our clients are looked after, we don’t mind when, or where, [staff] do their hours,” he says. “They can work from either of the UK offices or from home: I don’t want people driving 50 miles a day for work.”

While technology is key to enabling this flexibility and providing staff with the opportunity for a healthy work-life balance, the organisation also works to discourage employees from being fixated on their screens. “We want staff to take meetings outside or walking meetings whenever they can,” says Hall. “Thinking time, away from screens and emails, is important.”

Emails outside of work hours are not encouraged, and notifications on the organisation’s online workspace, Slack, are put on snooze during the evening and at weekends.



To further demonstrate the importance of having a strong work-life balance, employees are also asked to avoid having emails or the Slack app installed on their phones. “When the work day is complete, [they] should relax and switch off completely,” Hall explains.

This switching-off process is particularly important when it comes to employees taking

annual leave, because a very dim view is taken of anyone working while they are on their holiday.

“It happens, but I don’t expect people to be working when they’re off,” says Hall.

“Holidays are an important time for relaxing, and [employees] can’t do that properly if [they’re] worrying about work.”



“It’s too prescriptive,” she explains. “If someone wants to work flexibly, a blanket ban is counterproductive. Employers need to find ways to create a culture where employees can get the downtime they need.”

For instance, employers could include a disclaimer on emails stating that a response is not expected outside of normal working hours, says Suff. “It sends out an important message to staff. Senior managers have a key role to play in creating the right culture and expectations. It should be part of their training.”

Matovu adds: “Employers need to create a culture where boundary setting is encouraged. To do this, they must get the key influencers on board and talking about what’s possible, especially as more technology, such as artificial intelligence [AI], is introduced in to the workplace.”

GOOD PRACTICE

The National Forum for Health and Wellbeing at Work has created a set of guidelines to help employers set the right digital expectations for their staff, providing suggestions around the use of email generally, as well as recommendations for those looking into implementing timed email bans.

Sir Cary Cooper, professor of organisational psychology and health at Manchester Business School and one of the founders of the forum, says that the specifics will depend on the workplace; nevertheless, there are some core recommendations surrounding email etiquette employers should be aware of.

“Only copy in people who are relevant, and don’t send emails in the office; it’s much more efficient, and healthier, to walk to [the person’s] desk and talk to them,” he says. “With an email, it’s often necessary to get clarification, which takes no time when it’s face-to-face. And never do anything problematic, such as discipline, by email.”

A more effective use of technology can also help to reduce the prevalence of digital stress. “A delay can be put on an email, so it doesn’t get sent until working hours, or an employer can turn employees’ devices off,” explains Horsfall.

Employees’ mental health may also benefit from an overhaul of working practices. For example, employers could consider introducing ‘golden time’, during which there are no distractions. “Working for one hour then spending 10 minutes looking at email is much more effective,” says Matovu. “This allows more to be achieved, especially as so many emails are resolved within that timeframe.”

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

In addition to creating an underlying culture that minimises digital stressors, organisations can implement a health and wellbeing framework to support staff. This can often include harnessing the digital, phone-fixated culture for good, by providing digital routes to support. “Running through a mindfulness or guided meditation session on an app can help an employee de-stress and sleep better,” explains Horsfall. “It’s an easy way to access self-improvement techniques instantly.”

Technology can also be used to schedule breaks and activities such as yoga or a walk outside, which can really help employees unwind and switch off.



Viewpoint



Dr Gail Kinman is professor of occupational health psychology and director of the research centre for applied psychology at the University of Bedfordshire

People differ in the extent to which they prefer their work and personal life to be integrated or separated, but some downtime is always essential for continued health and productivity. Employers have a key role to play in helping staff to switch off from work, both mentally and physically.

Evidence that long working hours can threaten health and reduce job performance is overwhelming, and organisations that reward staff for performance, rather than face-time, are likely to have a happier, healthier workforce. People should be encouraged to go home on time, while creative options for flexible working could also be considered.

Although technology has many benefits for both individuals and organisations, staff can feel pressurised to be ‘always-on’. People who work remotely or are deeply involved in their work may find switching off particularly challenging due to feelings of isolation or a reluctance to disengage.

Excessive use of email during evenings, weekends and holidays can erode the boundaries between work and personal life, and increase the risk of health problems. However, *The new nowhere land? A research and practice agenda for the ‘always on’ culture*, published by myself and Almuth McDowall, professor of organisational psychology at Birkbeck, University of London, in September 2017, found that more than half of organisations do not provide staff with any guidance on how to manage technology in a healthy and sustainable way.

The first step is to identify why staff feel unable to switch off: they might be overloaded with work, fear losing control of projects, or working constantly may just have become habitual. Then, the most effective interventions are those driven by employees themselves, so focus groups could help identify the problems and options for change.

Managers are powerful role models, so it is essential to lead by example. Whenever possible, they should go home on time and resist emailing outside of working hours.

By combining this with appropriate policies, good practice and management support, the concept of technology as a source of stress in the workplace may only be short-lived.

“Organisations and employees need to manage technology, not the other way around,” Cooper concludes. “Taking control now will ensure the UK avoids restrictive legislation, and is able to use technology to support flexible working.” 



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Healthy competition

Is gamification the key to boosting employee health and wellbeing?



Nick Martindale |
freelance journalist

The use of gamification to engage employees has become increasingly common in recent years, whether organisations are running their own internal challenges, or accessing more formal apps offered by providers.

The basic concept is simple: by introducing an element of gamification to any challenge or initiative, employees are more likely to take part, not only motivated by the opportunity for personal reward, but also drawn by the competitive element.

WELLBEING APPLICATIONS

The concept of gamification is a natural fit with wellbeing activities, says Jeff Fox, principal at Aon. “The spectrum is broad, with basic challenges at one end, with step challenges being the best-known example. The more innovative end of the spectrum covers games that involve the full physical universe, such as nutritional challenges, emotional states, blood pressure checks and different physical activities, such as swimming or cycling,” he explains.

Central to the use of gamification is positive reinforcement, adds Jamie Mackenzie, director at Sodexo Engage: “With traditional video games, completing a level or a mission provides feelings of both excitement and fulfilment, giving players the enthusiasm to keep on gaming. In the same way, gamified platforms need to have a suitable progression structure in place to keep staff engaged. This can then extend into the physical world, through providing physical rewards, such as gift cards or cinema tickets, once employees have reached a certain level.”

REWARDING ACHIEVEMENTS

The rewards provided to employees in a gamified wellbeing system do not have to be particularly significant, says Joe Gaunt, chief executive officer of wellbeing firm Hero. “The fun of participating, the camaraderie and a simple ‘well done’ at the end can be more than enough. Extra leave, team time, individual vouchers or simple gifts can go a long way, too.”

However, there are challenges that come with the use of gamification, says Mike Blake, wellbeing lead at Willis Towers Watson. “The aim is to hold employees’ attention, so they make significant changes to their behaviour over a prolonged period, but the way in which employers sustain high levels of motivation and engagement is where an issue can arise: a precedent can be set that leads to employees expecting to be compensated for living healthier lifestyles.”

It is also important that employees do not feel pressured to take part, or shamed by any competitive element, says Gethin Nadin, director of employee wellbeing at Benefex.

“Not every employee is motivated by competing with their peers, and gamification should be aimed at employees trying to improve their own physical, financial and mental health, rather than trying to improve it above that of others,” he explains. “Employers



NEED TO KNOW

- The use of gamification is growing across many elements of the employee experience, and can be used to engage employees in wellbeing initiatives, from step challenges to nutritional habits.
- It is important to ensure that gamified systems are inclusive and engaging, and that the competitive element does not put off less willing participants.
- Employers should keep initiatives under review and allow for personalised tailoring to ensure they engage staff and target the needs of the workforce.

should be focused on helping employees form better habits around their health, not just gamifying it.”

Those most in need may also be less likely to take part, and this is unlikely to be solved if a gamified system only scratches the surface, says James Shillaker, director at employee wellness provider Incorpore. >



“Most people find exercise an effort and don’t necessarily enjoy the process,” he says. “Those individuals need to tap into intrinsic factors [that are] a by-product reward of exercising, for example, being able to do more with their kids or have more energy for the work they love.”

EVERYDAY HABITS

It is also important that ongoing work is done to develop, update and reinvigorate gamified wellbeing programmes, rather than simply setting them up and leaving them, because this may result in loss of interest after the initial fad.

Denise Willett, general manager at Achievers, says: “[Employers should] bring the gamification into the day-to-day, encourage little competitions among teams or departments and have mini events every month to bring people together.

“Encourage employees to compete both against each other and their own prior results to keep them motivated.”

The key to a successfully gamified wellbeing initiative lies in understanding what people want and which areas of health need to be boosted, says Sarah Lockhart, principal consultant at Thomsons Online Benefits.

“This could be anything from encouraging better sleep patterns to reducing stress,” she says. “Having a focused approach to gamification will offer clarity to employees and help to make this aspect of an employer’s health and wellbeing provision more effective.”

Using modern apps and platforms, employers can also extract data about who is using the schemes, identify what motivates people to take part, and even monitor anonymised employee health data to track improvements and measure success.

PERSONAL APPROACH

Personalising elements of the programme, for example, allowing people to choose their own rewards, can also be key to its success, says Malcolm Cairns, chief executive officer at HSC Health.

“[Organisations could] consider a system where employees gain points for tracking their wellbeing and achieving goals,” he says. “Personalise the programme and tailor [it] to seasonal themes or organisation events, such as summer or end of year; keep it fresh and relevant. Listen to employees and adjust to their adapting needs.”

While gamification may be becoming part of the wider wellbeing landscape, there is still significant potential that has yet to be realised.

“Considering the popularity of gaming among [younger employees], this is likely to be a big area of development within the benefits space,” says Lockhart. “With the proper attention and effort behind it, gamification could become an integral part of a modern benefits offering.” ^{cb}



Case study | Fujitsu

Fujitsu uses gamification to ingrain behavioural change and improve employee health



IT services firm Fujitsu runs an annual step challenge, during which employees compete in teams of up to seven, with the ultimate aim of helping staff become more active, as well as improving engagement.

The challenge itself is hosted by Virgin Pulse. Individuals and teams compete over a 100-day period during the summer months, using trackers to monitor activity and an online platform to show progress.

In 2018, 735 people took part, taking 976 million steps altogether, and this year’s challenge is currently under way.

The business has seen significant results, with 86% of employees who took part taking 10,000 steps a day by the end of the challenge in 2018, compared to just 21% at the start, and 63% feeling more productive and being able to concentrate better, says Ian Howarth, HR specialist in wellbeing at Fujitsu.

Having a challenge taking place over a long period means behavioural change is more likely to become ingrained in habit and maintained afterwards, adds Howarth.

In addition, maintaining a continued dialogue with team captains helps to

ensure that motivation does not tail off. “I hold a conference call with them every few weeks throughout the challenge, because that enables me to keep them abreast of where we’re at and it gives them some content to keep talking to their teams about,” says Howarth.

Using competition to push employees to do more to improve their health is important, but this alone is not the foundation for a successful wellbeing initiative, says Howarth.

In fact, too strong an emphasis on outright winning can work to an employer’s detriment, moving the initiative away from its original goal of personal improvement. “You don’t want the competitive element to dissuade people from taking part because they don’t believe they’re going to be able to match their colleagues,” he explains.

“[Employers] need to make sure that [they] celebrate those teams that are increasing their step averages week on week, for example, as opposed to just having a league table of who is doing the most.”

industry insight
provided by

Targeting killers

Investing in health at work to help save lives



John Norton | head of workplace wellbeing
British Heart Foundation

The British Heart Foundation (BHF) funds about £100 million of research each year into heart and circulatory diseases. These stop the heart from pumping and the blood from flowing properly; they can have the same risk factors, and one can lead to the other.

Heart diseases, stroke and vascular dementia are all connected; that is why the BHF's research starts with the heart, but does not stop there.

Heart and circulatory diseases kill more than one in four, and cause about 460 deaths each day in the UK, resulting in heartbreak for far too many families. The total annual healthcare cost of heart and circulatory disease in the UK is about £9 billion, with more than seven million people living with the conditions.

Having high blood pressure or raised cholesterol increases the risk of heart and circulatory disease. The BHF wants to stop people developing these conditions in the future, and make sure those with existing conditions and risk factors are detected early and given information on how to best control them.

Moreover, everyone, regardless of where they live or who they are,

should receive the treatment, care and support they need.

When an employee suffers a heart attack or stroke and needs to have time off work to recover physically, emotionally and psychologically, that has a damaging effect on their organisation. Because of this, employers increasingly believe that their duty of care includes providing staff with easy access to a health check provided by a trusted organisation as a valued benefit.

This is supported by the *Employee Benefits/Health Shield Healthcare research 2019*, which shows that 36% of respondents believe their organisation has a fundamental duty of care to encourage employees to attend health screenings.

Five-year versus risk-category-specific screening intervals for cardiovascular disease prevention: A cohort study, published in the *Lancet* in April 2019, found that nearly one in 12 heart attacks and strokes in England and Wales could be prevented by targeted, routine check-ups.

Commenting on the study, Professor Sir Nilesh Samani, medical director at BHF, said: "If you know

you're at higher risk of developing heart and circulatory disease, it's really important to attend regular health checks to help manage your risk factors to prevent problems later."

A number of organisations are choosing to invest in staff by providing heart health checks in the workplace. This can help lead to higher engagement, improved resilience and better retention of talent.

Organisations are also seeing the value of employees knowing their chances of having a heart attack or stroke, which can be estimated by looking at risk factors such as blood pressure, cholesterol, blood-sugar levels, age, family history and whether a person smokes.

Many of us live in environments that encourage unhealthy diets and discourage physical activity. The BHF's analysis of various health surveys undertaken by NHS Digital, the Scottish Government, the Welsh government and the Department of Health over 2018 and 2019 shows that 28% of adults in the UK are obese, and about half have raised cholesterol. Obesity is a major risk factor for heart and circulatory disease.

By working with government, industry, employers and the public, the BHF wants to see a world in which the healthy choice is the easy choice, creating an environment free from the fear of heart and circulatory disease ^{eb}



Perks and interventions

How can employers have a tangible impact on employee health?



Stephen Bevan | head of HR research development
Institute for Employment Studies

Does an employer offer health benefits to its employees because it wants to improve their health, or because it wants to attract, motivate and retain talent? The answer can, quite legitimately, be 'both', of course.

Among those organisations that do offer health benefits, do they know how many employees take them up each year, and the precise impact these have on sickness absence or productivity, compared with offering no health benefits at all? This is a slightly trickier question, but if an employer can say 'yes' to the first part and 'no' to the second, it is at least in the majority.

The truth is, employers are more likely to be offering these benefits as a recruitment and retention 'perk' than in the expectation that they will improve employee health in any discernible way. There is no shame in this, but it would be better if we were honest about it. So, why does any of this matter?

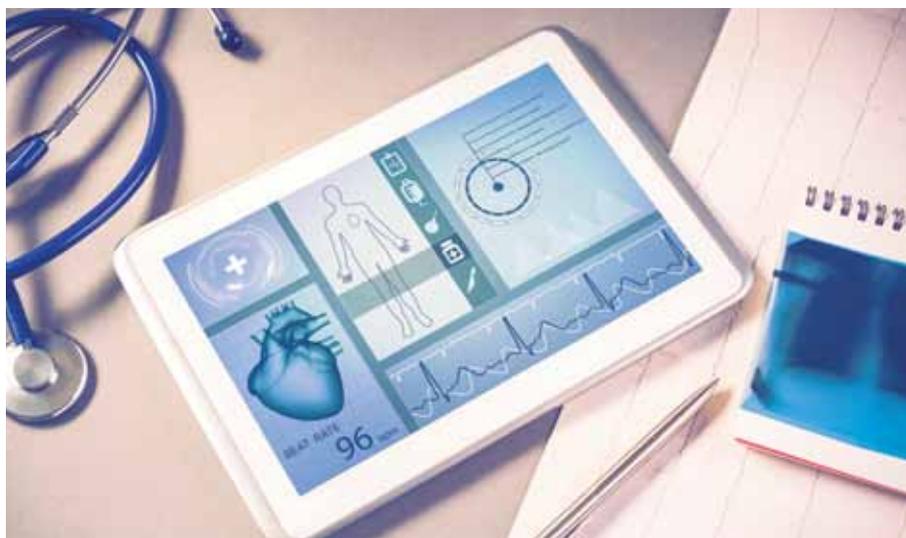
Having seen many attempts by large and small employers to use gym memberships, extra lettuce in the canteen and Indian head massages to amount to a workplace health strategy, my conclusion is that offering health benefits helps employers compete for talent, but often makes little difference to employee health, absence or productivity. In the grand scheme of things, though, it is the improvements in workforce health that the UK PLC needs most urgently.

According to some calculations, by 2030, about 40% of the UK workforce will have at least one work-limiting chronic illness. The bulk of the health burden among working-age people will continue to be shared between mental illnesses and musculo-skeletal disorders. Other conditions, such as cancer, asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder, will also play a part in impairing the productive capacity of the future workforce.

All of this must be considered against the background of a number of familiar demographic trends, such as ageing. Life expectancy at age 65 for men and women now exceeds 25 years; it is inevitable that there will be many more older people, who are, of course, more susceptible to chronic illness, remaining in work beyond state pension age.

There is a clear case for increased employer investment in workplace health: a healthy workforce is more likely to be resourceful, productive, innovative, motivated, agile, loyal and have improved attendance. So, if employers want to target resources and energy on creating healthier workplaces, beyond what they offer as recruitment and retention-boosting perks, where should they put their money?

Looking at the interventions employers are currently implementing, the most common include: flexible and part-time working; employee assistance programmes (EAPs); healthy eating initiatives; subsidised gym membership; support for increased physical activity, such as fun runs or pedometer challenges; stress management programmes; access to occupational health support; and training for line managers in mental illness symptoms and referral.



Research looking at which of these interventions are most effective is, in general, disappointingly inconclusive. One might be surprised to learn, for example, that giving flu jabs to staff makes no difference to sickness absence, and training employees as mental health first aiders has no measurable effect on absence rates or productivity.

Where the evidence is stronger, it tells us that early intervention and referral to occupational health or an EAP can be decisive. Effective and empathic line management, from individuals who can provide work and workplace accommodations, is also beneficial. So, too, is a well-planned package of vocational rehabilitation.

Promoting and supporting better lifestyle habits can only ever be one, relatively minor, element of a more holistic, preventative, culturally challenging and sustainable approach to delivering physically and psychologically healthy workplaces, in which staff can thrive and give full expression to both their creative energy and talents.

My worry is that, by pretending that health benefits are the same as health interventions, we may be convincing ourselves that we are making a difference to workplace health when we are not 

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