

So how do  
*you* really feel?

**The State of Mental Wellbeing in  
the Communication Profession**

*Because we're stronger together*

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**“The way that mental health is framed it often puts pressure on people to balance a constantly high workload with sustained demands but also make sure we are looking after our mental health and supporting our team’s mental health.**

**The conversation on mental health in our profession is decoupled from practical ways to reduce or manage workload and work stress. It can feel like if I don’t manage all of these things, I have failed.”**

*– In-house professional, Australia*

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## Foreword: Sia Papageorgiou



I'm thrilled to present the results of the *So how do you really feel?* global study, designed to provide insight into how communication and public relations professionals are feeling about their mental wellbeing – to identify the barriers to improving it and gain insights that employers, leaders, and our profession's associations can use to help ease the pressure.

Mental wellbeing, exhaustion, stress, and burnout are very real issues in the communication profession right now. Our global check-in comes as we face increasing pressure in this period of ongoing crisis brought about by the global COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts.

The report, which includes the results of our survey and seven case studies developed through interviews with communication leaders around the world, highlights the fact that supporting the mental wellbeing of communication and public relations professionals is not just a “nice-to-have.” In this global race for talent, it has become a business imperative and a strategic advantage. But almost three-quarters of respondents indicated their organisations needs to do more to support mental wellbeing in the workplace.

Not surprisingly, two-thirds of respondents said their mental wellbeing has declined since the beginning of the pandemic and more than half have considered leaving our profession because of this. What struck me most is that less than half of respondents are optimistic about their mental wellbeing going into 2022. This is cause for considerable concern and needs to be addressed as a matter of some urgency.

These results highlight an incredible opportunity for communication and public relations professionals to collectively influence what comes next.

My sincere thanks to the many communication and public relations professionals around the world who took the time to tell us how they're feeling and the leaders who participated in our case-study interviews. I would like to especially thank the communication and public relations associations which supported this important study, including the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA), Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), and Canadian Public Relations Institute (CPRS). My thanks also to mental wellbeing consultant Julie Gillespie and Canada-based PR agency energi-PR.

I hope these insights help you to have better conversations with your leaders, peers, colleagues, and clients. Let's use them collectively to create the type of environment where communication and public relations professionals feel respected, accepted, and comfortable to be themselves. Essentially, workplaces where we thrive, flourish, and do our best work. Because we really are stronger together.

Sia Papageorgiou FRSA, SCMP  
Managing Partner  
Centre for Strategic Communication Excellence

## Foreword: Brett Gumbley



We know something needs to be done when we find out that almost half of all communication and public relations professionals who responded to the *So how do you really feel?* global study have considered leaving the profession to support their mental wellbeing.

Communication and public relations professionals are often at the frontline when it comes to crisis management and the past few years have been no different. They've navigated crisis after crisis, with no end in sight. They've been, and in many cases, still are, fighting the good fight. But they're tired, exhausted, and burnt out.

This is an unsustainable situation for individuals, organisations, and the profession – things need to change.

But to initiate change, we must fully understand what's going on both from a micro and a macro point of view. It's only then that we can work out what's needed to help improve the situation.

Antenna is privileged to serve the communication profession as a partner on public opinion research. We welcomed the opportunity to explore how communication and public relations professionals are feeling, and how individuals and organisations are supporting their mental wellbeing.

You will see throughout this report, we've identified some of the key areas that individuals, organisations, and the profession's associations need to tackle to help support good mental wellbeing practice across the communication profession.

We hope that this research is the catalyst for positive change.

Brett Gumbley  
Director  
Antenna

## So how do you really feel?

It's taken a global pandemic to bring mental wellbeing to the attention of every institution, organisation and individual. COVID-19 has changed our job landscapes and permanently shifted the way we work. And, with the separation between home and work shrinking, an increase in workload, and the stress over our health and our families, it's not surprising communication and public relations professionals are **stressed, anxious, and frustrated**. In-house professionals feel more frustrated (51%) and annoyed (31%) than their agency colleagues – at 34% and 19% respectively.



Q: Which of these words describe how you currently feel?

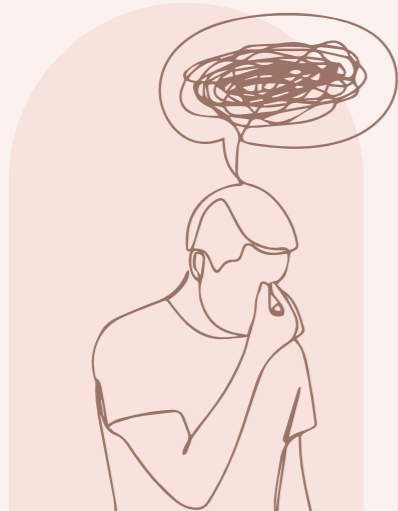
**“With a move to virtual platforms, the days of buffers between meetings is gone. Many of us worked long hours during COVID to ensure internal communications was heightened and external stakeholders were informed, all while completing scheduled activities. There has been no reset.”**

– In-house professional, Canada

# The current state of mental wellbeing in the communication profession

It's not surprising that, with increased workloads and pressure, two-thirds of communication and public relations professionals said their mental wellbeing is worse than it was at the beginning of the pandemic. In-house professionals reported a greater decline in their mental wellbeing (70%) than their agency colleagues (57%).

Q: Has this been a change from before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?



**66%**

Yes, my mental wellbeing has declined

**19%**

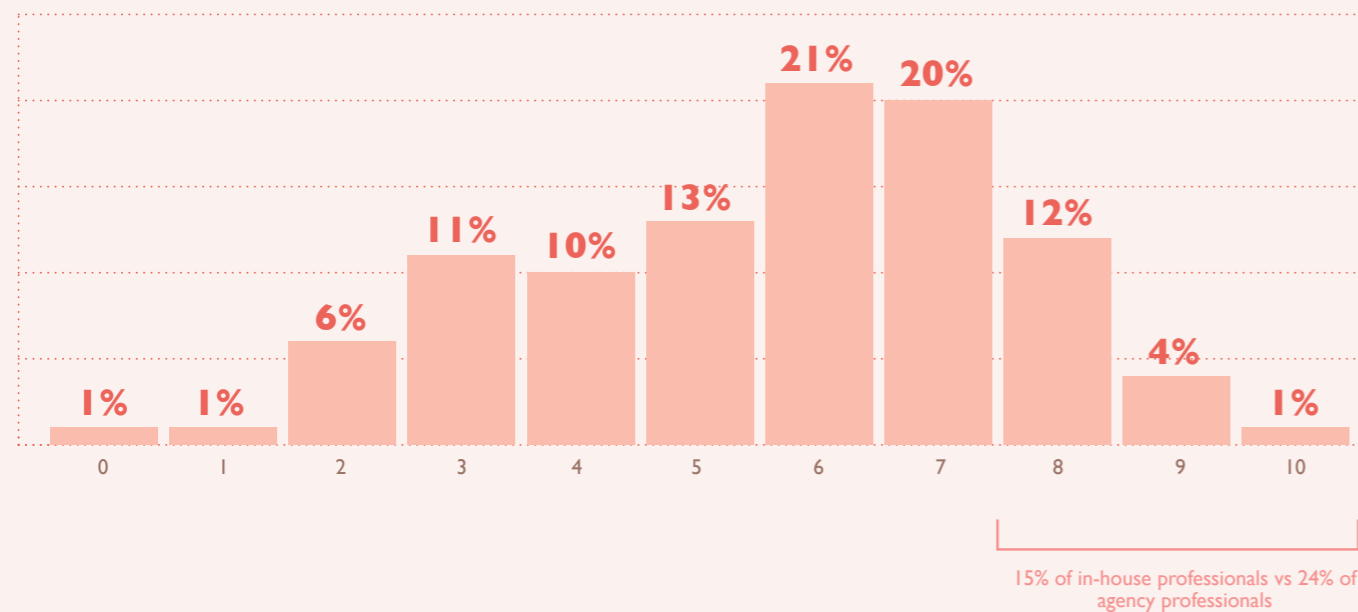
Yes, my mental wellbeing has improved

**15%**

No change

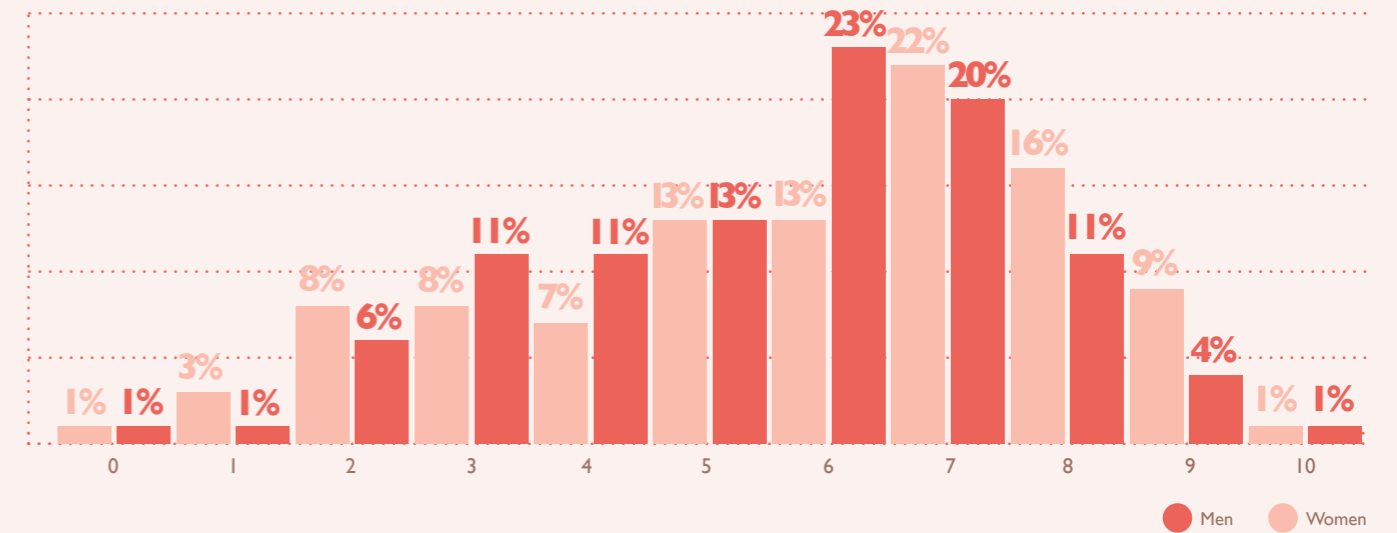
## Fewer than 1 in 5 respondents rate themselves an 8 or higher.

Q: How would you rate your current level of mental wellbeing?



## Women rated their mental wellbeing lower than men.

Q: How would you rate your current level of mental wellbeing?



*“Not all parts of the business (or all people) are impacted equally by COVID/crisis, so there is no universal understanding of the pressures faced by communication teams.”*

– Agency Professional, Australia

What should be of major concern to the communication profession is that almost half of respondents have considered leaving the profession for the sake of their mental wellbeing.



**48%**

of communication and public relations professionals have considered leaving the profession because of their mental wellbeing.

## Case study



**Business:** Healthscope is Australia's only national private hospital operation and healthcare provider with a network of 42 hospitals that service every state and territory.

**Country:** Australia

**Employees:** 19,000

**Size of the communication function:** Four employees working across internal and external communication, and issues management (out of a broader team of 12 including other corporate affairs disciplines and marketing).

**With thanks to:**



Julia Foley – Chief Corporate Affairs Officer

Few communication and public relations professionals have had any experience managing a crisis state for so long. The relentlessness and unpredictability of the pandemic, coupled with the uncertainty – which continues – is unprecedented territory for communication and public relations professionals.

### Healthscope's challenges

Working in healthcare the team witnessed the impacts of COVID-19 early.

Healthscope's frontline teams played a key role in supporting the country's COVID-19 response, in particular through the outbreaks in New South Wales and Victoria across 2020 and 2021. This support included re-opening a hospital to care for COVID-positive aged care residents, and later, for children unable to be cared for by COVID-positive parents. Clinical staff also worked on site in aged care residences affected by COVID-19 outbreaks, while numerous hospitals and staff in New South Wales and Victoria treated COVID-19 patients on site.

The nature of the content the communications professionals were dealing with, including the clinical, staff, patient, and family realities, added another dimension to simply helping their workforce navigate the pandemic. Sometimes it was distressing and emotionally affecting, and this took a toll they didn't anticipate.

Meeting the immediate demands of the crisis meant that the welfare of the communication team was something they only turned their attention to when they had a little space and opportunity.

**“The reality is when you're in a crisis you are busy dealing with it. In retrospect if we had known about the time period involved, we would have put our own oxygen masks on earlier.”**

The Healthscope Corporate Affairs team learned that you don't have to be on the frontline to experience the trauma of COVID-19. The team had to establish and run initiatives to support the broader business through the crisis, as well as themselves.

### What the research says

Healthscope has been conscious in its response about the impacts of COVID-19 on **its entire workforce**, both frontline and those working in support roles. International research on the psychological impacts of COVID-19 on healthcare workers identified some distinction between impacts on clinical and non-clinical healthcare workers (those not involved in direct patient care, including administrative and clerical staff). **A Singapore study concluded that non-medical health care personnel are at highest risk for psychological distress during the COVID-19 outbreak.** The study suggests reasons for this may include reduced accessibility to formal psychological support, less first-hand medical information on the outbreak, and less intensive training on personal protective equipment and infection control measures.

Another **study from Wuhan** noted higher levels of 'vicarious traumatising' in non-frontline nurses compared with nurses caring for COVID patients based in part on the **'sufficient psychological preparation'** of the latter group and in part on the sympathy they exhibit both for the patients and for their frontline colleagues.

This suggested the need for **a holistic response to maximise the physical and psychological safety of Healthscope's workforce.**

### Wellbeing action

#### Organisation-wide support initiatives

To support the mental wellbeing of Healthscope's workforce, the Corporate Affairs team worked with their colleagues in People & Culture (P&C) to strengthen the promotion of Healthscope's Employee Assistance Program and safety messaging, including messages around mental health and wellbeing. The organisation also took the opportunity to refresh the company values. This gave everyone at Healthscope an opportunity to reflect on the spirit in which they had worked throughout the pandemic. The organisation now has new 'safe values' which has given them a new language and base to share stories pertaining to the values. Teams were encouraged to nominate 'values champions' who embody these values. Their photos feature on the values collateral – a memorable deck of playing cards with each suit representing a different value (we care (hearts), we do (spades), we strive (diamonds), we're a team (clubs)).

#### This Covid Life video series

Although a shared experience, everyone's COVID-19 stories are different. Recognising this, the Healthscope Corporate Affairs team wanted to share people's personal stories to bring its workforce closer together. Their aim was to proudly demonstrate the way their people have responded to life-changing and life-affirming challenges. They did this by producing a video series called *This Covid Life*, where staff across Healthscope spoke about their experiences – often emotional and touching – throughout the pandemic. Each video is a maximum of two minutes in length, enough to capture the essence of the person and their contribution.

Since the first series was produced in 2020, the narrative and type of information desired has changed. People don't want a COVID-19 update every day; now they are searching for positive news. In 2021 the team produced another series of *This Covid Life* videos but this time they had a more positive, optimistic tone. They called the new series: *This Covid Life – Vaccinated*.

**Watch [This Covid Life](#) and [This Covid Life – Vaccinated](#) videos.**

### Other mental wellbeing initiatives implemented across Healthscope

- **A mindfulness series** structured in episodes developed by the organisation's own mental health expert network produced specifically for Healthscope employees.
- **Executive leader R U OK? phone calls** which include the organisation's Executive Leadership Team making personal phone calls to the organisation's leaders to check in on how people are feeling.
- **Engaging expert consultants** to conduct focus groups to understand the impacts and develop additional wellbeing initiatives both for corporate employees and for hospital leaders and teams.
- **Wellness video calls** run by an independent workplace coach twice daily for all Healthscope employees, offering a safe space for people to share their personal and professional concerns and challenges.

### Communication and public relations professionals looking after each other

Working seven days a week at all hours of the day and night took its toll on the Healthscope Corporate Affairs team and they were burning out. Even though the team demonstrated incredible resilience, they had to change the way they worked and bring in support and training to help them manage their mental health and wellbeing.

The changes they made include:

- **Working to a roster** – which means the team knows who is on duty weeks in advance so they feel more in control when they are at work and can switch off properly when they are not.
- **Providing additional leave** – both time in lieu for weekend and extended hours and being proactive about giving people time to recover or when fatigue is observed.
- **Being 'Healthscope Ready'** – producing a series of templates and playbooks that cover as many known scenarios as possible to share learnings, giving the team a framework and starting point no matter what the nuances of the specific situation. They also provide their stakeholders with an assurance that the team is prepared.
- **Engaging a clinical psychologist** – to work with the team each month who is also available to individuals to help support the more challenging emotional aspects including exposure to clinical issues and trauma that communication and public relations professionals are not used to dealing with on an ongoing basis.
- **Meeting frequently** – up to three times a week, online for an hour at a time to share information and stories, and make sure people feel supported given face-to-face team time was impossible.
- **Balancing priorities** – having active conversations about how to balance COVID-19 work with business-as-usual work so that the pandemic does not become all consuming.

### A positive consequence

At the beginning of the pandemic, the communication team was comprised of two people, which has now doubled to four. New team members, including in the broader Corporate Affairs team, continue to model and champion a 'can-do,' 'lean-in,' 'what can I do to help,' attitude which dominates the team's culture. Despite the ongoing pressures they face, the team has achieved the highest engagement scores across the organisation – averaging 87% engagement over the last two years.

The team believes their work is incredibly meaningful and purpose-driven and they derive genuine satisfaction from helping frontline workers, patients and their families access the information they need, when they need it. They believe their ongoing challenge will be how to recreate these outcomes in a non-pandemic context.

**“There’s no breathing space – there’s always more to be done. We are first to be criticised and last to be recognised. Managing social media channels takes its toll. We can’t switch off, there’s always got to be someone keeping an eye on things. Journalist calls on a weekend need to be answered.”**

– In-house professional, Australia

**“Client demands keep increasing and sometimes become unrealistic, yet the money we get from them is less compared to previous years. Agency team members become more exhausted due to clients’ demands as well as the pandemic and economic downfall.**

**We cannot set boundaries or fire clients that are taking a toll on our mental health because we cannot afford to lose clients after the pandemic.”**

– Agency professional, Myanmar

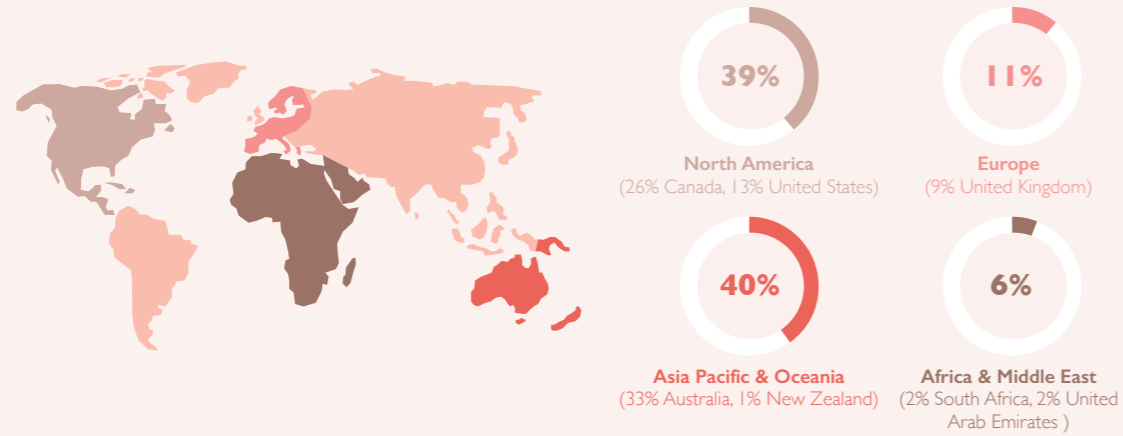


# Who responded to our survey

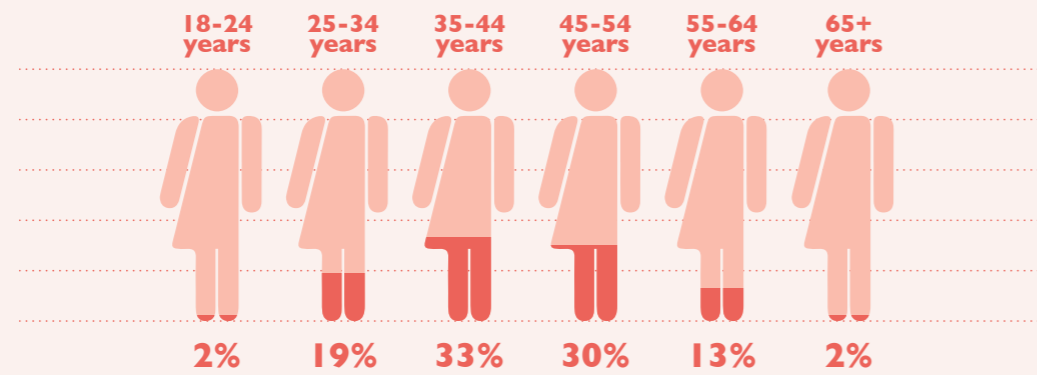


**788**  
respondents  
from **40**  
countries

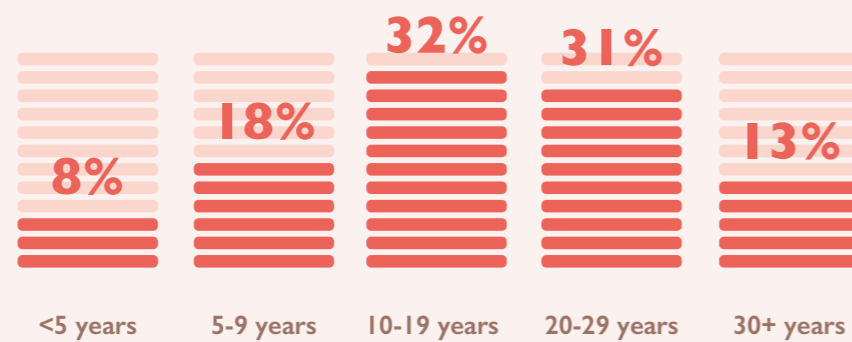
## Location



## Age



## Years in communication profession

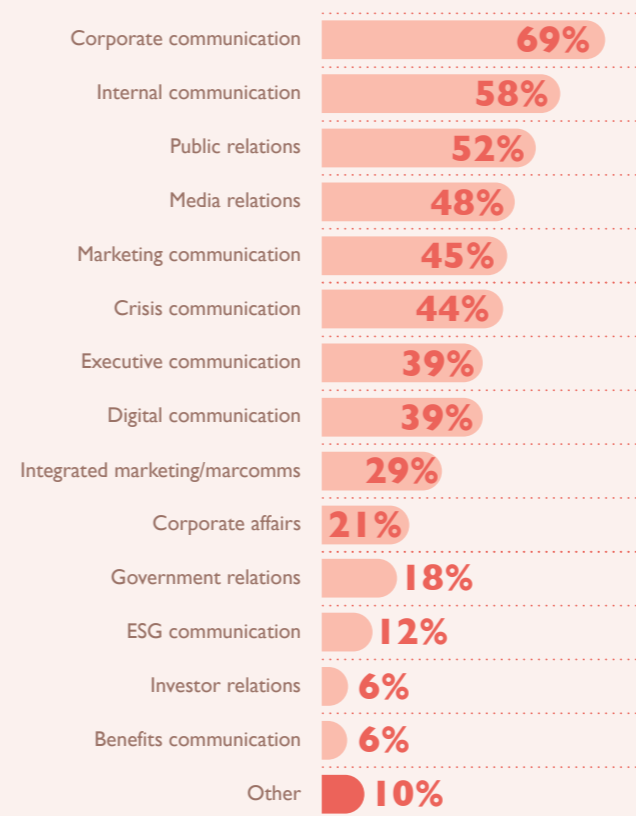


**69%**  
work  
in-house

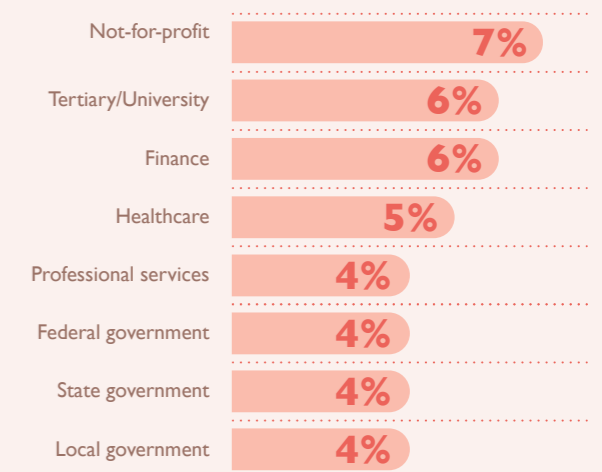


**30%**  
work in  
an agency

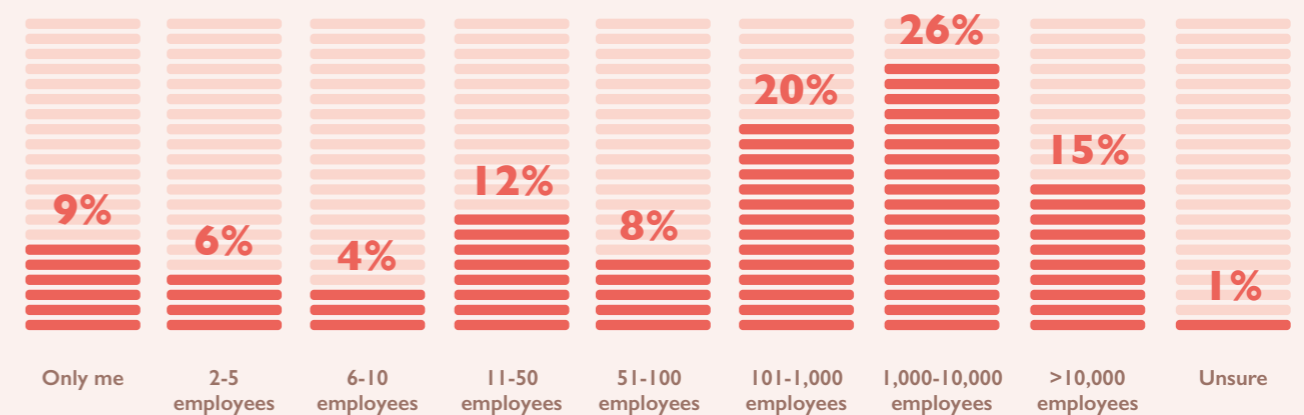
## Area of specialisation



## 30 industries represented including:



## Organisation size





## Case study



**Business:** WE is one of the largest independent communications and integrated marketing agencies in the world – ranked 20th in the global top 250 agencies by [PRovoke Media](#).

**Country:** Global

**Employees:** Around 60 people in Australia including nine in the senior management team.

**With thanks to:**



Dan Woods – Managing Director Australia

Working in a PR agency can be relentless in terms of client needs and demands – and that's on a good day. But the COVID-19 pandemic has been a game changer. Dan Woods and his team at WE have never worked so hard in their lives. They're no strangers to hard work of course, but this was a different kind of hard.

### Culture starts at the top

At WE, the executive leadership team actively practices rigorous authenticity. They show up, they're present, and they listen to their people. They've also been deliberate in creating an environment in which people feel respected, accepted, and comfortable to be themselves. For them, there is no 'set and forget' when it comes to people's mental wellbeing – conversations are organic, real, and most importantly, ongoing. It is these very conversations that have informed the development of a mental wellbeing roadmap that includes concrete actions and measures – one that is continually adjusted as people's needs change.

*“Lead with authenticity and vulnerability and that includes sometimes being comfortable with not knowing.”*

The feedback from WE employees has been overwhelmingly positive. Despite the ongoing challenges and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, WE employees have expressed appreciation that WE's leaders continue to listen and demonstrate a genuine commitment to supporting people's mental wellbeing.

### WE's five key considerations

- **What is the individual impact on people's lives?** Everyone's circumstances are different – whether that means their location, type of dwelling they live in, and the family/social dynamics they need to manage.
- **What is the impact on our workday?** The pandemic increased our collective hyperconnectivity and a feeling of always 'being on,' blurring the lines between when the working day starts and stops.
- **How will remote work affect people's experience?** The inability to connect with people face-to-face during lockdowns dramatically changed the nature of people's interactions – sometimes leaving people anxious and uncertain.
- **What is our next 'normal?'** As Australia re-opens there is a sense of anxiousness and uncertainty for some – coping with life after lockdown brings with it a level of 're-entry' anxiety.
- **How will the great resignation affect us?** People are quitting for a variety of reasons, and this increases the level of unpredictability.

### How WE supports their people's mental wellbeing

WE acknowledges their people express concern, stress, and anxiety in different ways. Active listening to understand their people's needs is, therefore, key to their approach. There are a number of ways WE has supported its employees throughout the pandemic both globally and specifically to meet Australian needs, including:

1. **Announcing a moratorium on any job losses** when the COVID-19 pandemic was declared.
2. Strengthening the **Employee Assistance Program** to provide confidential counselling and support.
3. Increasing the **focus on people's learning and development** so employees could continue to grow professionally.
4. Implementing an **84U initiative**, which is essentially eight hours of free time for people to enjoy (i.e., a vacation day).
5. Engaging a **mental health and resilience provider** to conduct a series of voluntary resilience programs, which achieved between 50%-70% participation per session.
6. Launching a **meditation program** for employees to practice mindfulness.
7. Leveraging **R U OK? Day** to make ongoing wellbeing check-ins a **regular occurrence**. This has changed the conversation and increased the appetite for people to share their mental wellbeing challenges in a more authentic way.
8. Implementing **health and exercise programs** as a direct result of staff feedback.
9. Providing **exercise equipment** to staff so they can participate in fitness programs at home, with sessions facilitated by an external fitness provider
10. Giving people an annualised **work-from-home equipment allowance**.
11. **Equal access to certain state-based public holidays** – granting all employees a day off at the same time, regardless of which state they work in.
12. **Additional vacation days** – all employees are granted extra vacation days at Christmas.
13. Focusing on **reward and recognition** – giving managers a reward and recognition budget which they can use collectively or individually.
14. An **increased focus on flexible work practices** – allowing people to continue to work in a hybrid way.

### Balancing a relentless workload

*“Sometimes you don't. That's the reality.”*

The nature of the work we do in the communication profession is tough with or without COVID-19. This means it's important for leaders to be even more attuned to their people's challenges and frustrations and have 'safety nets and release valves' in place so that they are aware of the support options available to them. This also includes additional emphasis on the resources needed to manage workloads and demands.

Globally, WE is conscious of the enormous stress placed on their executive leaders who are leading practices and people in a challenging and very fluid environment. Even at an executive level, the organisation checks-in regularly to understand how best to support their senior leaders. WE Australia has also established programs for senior leaders to help them deal with other people's mental health challenges. Their collective experiences and insights are shared with the WE global executive – so they can incorporate into their approach from a global perspective and share successful initiatives with other international WE leads.

*“We need to be cognisant of the realities and changing nature of the pandemic – we're not machines.”*

Supporting one another has been the most important aspect of managing through COVID-19 at WE. It's something that's talked about a lot across the organisation. Connectivity and ongoing communication are, therefore, critical. Additionally, Dan and his executive leadership team have worked hard to engender a working environment underpinned by trust and treating people like the adults they are. This means that people are free to work in a way that is most productive for the individual.

Some of these initiatives were implemented primarily because of the pandemic, others were amplified based on previous initiatives. What that's all done, is propel the importance of understanding and supporting people's mental wellbeing forward. And WE is committed to maintaining this focus well into the future.

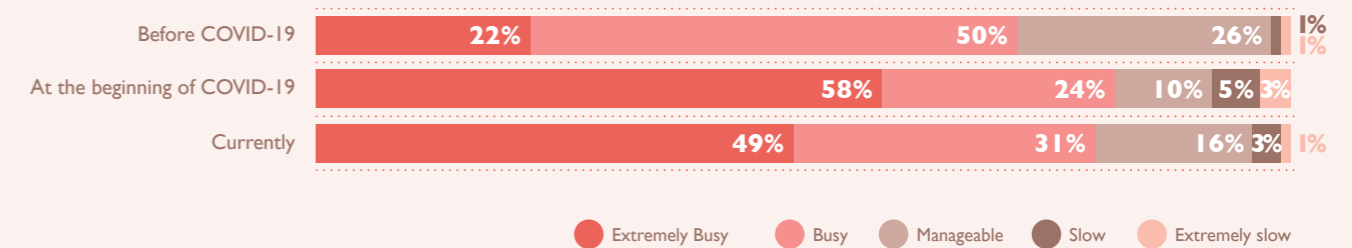
### Additional pearls of wisdom from Dan

1. **Practice authentic leadership** – and don't bulls\*t people, they can see right through it. You should always demonstrate a genuine desire to put your people first.
2. **Never assume** – meet people where they are and try to understand what they're experiencing by providing opportunities to speak up safely.
3. **Avoid tokenism** – actions speak louder than words so, do as you say and make sure it's meaningful for your people.
4. **Trust that what you're doing is valuable and valued** – mental wellbeing is a private experience, and everyone is different. You won't always receive overt confirmation that each initiative is adopted by everyone, and that's okay.
5. **Do what it says on the tin** – what you say and do externally needs to match what you say and do internally. This won't stop people from leaving your organisation, but it will certainly make it a great place to work and help you attract new talent.
6. **People are ultimately responsible for themselves** – as an employer, you can't solve everyone's problems. But while people are at work, you should do what you can to provide a positive and authentic employee experience, and that includes supporting people's mental wellbeing.

## The impact of workload and demands

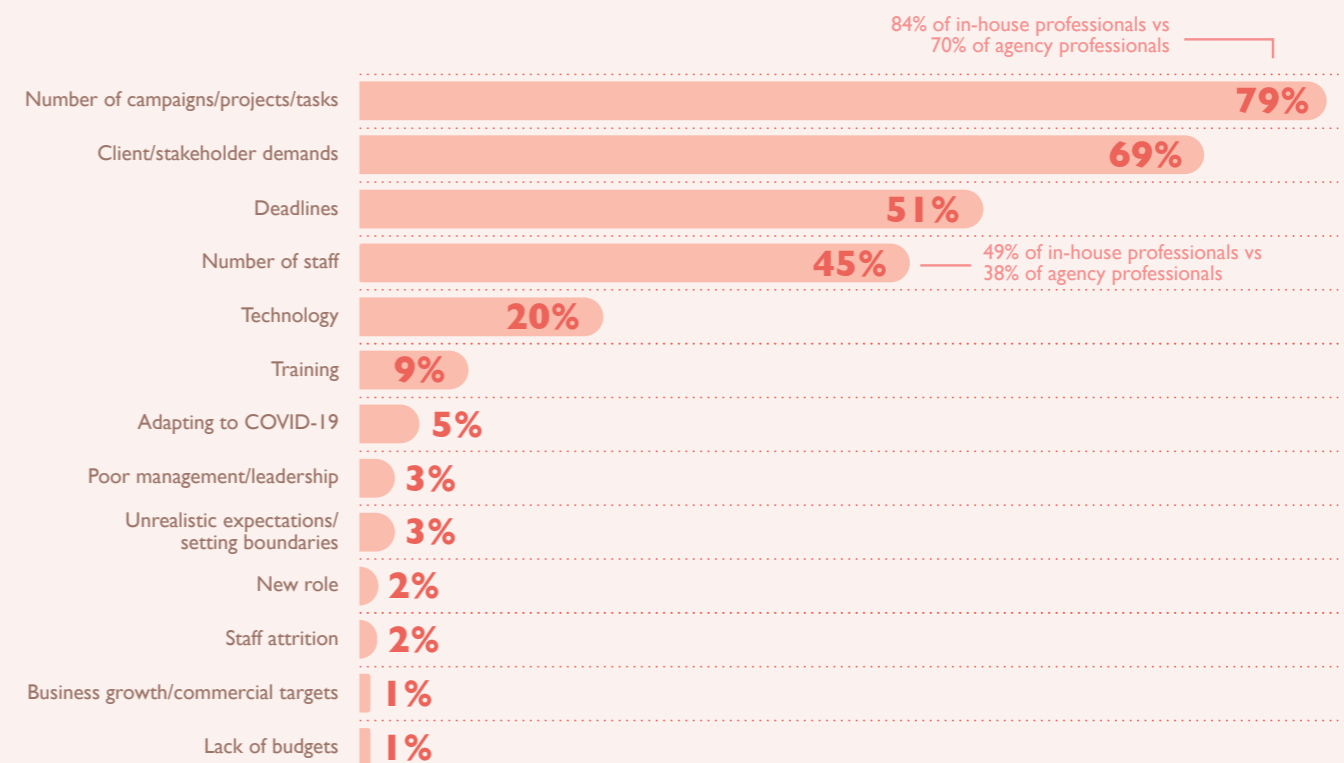
Communication and public relations professionals are busy at the best of times, but the pandemic has added to this already challenging workload. At the beginning of the pandemic, the number of communication and public relations professionals who said they were 'extremely busy' more than doubled (from 22% before the pandemic, to 58% at the beginning). This hasn't eased much since, with 49% of respondents still saying they're 'extremely busy'. This figure is trending downwards, most likely due to the reduced volatility of the crisis; however, we would have hoped to have seen this reduce considerably more as we adapt to a COVID-normal life. In-house professionals reported being busier (89%) than their agency colleagues (66%) during the pandemic.

### Q: How would you describe your workload before and through the COVID-19 pandemic?



More campaigns and tasks (79%) and increasing client and stakeholder demands (69%) top the list of contributing factors to current workloads. One could assume adapting to COVID-19 would be a contributing factor, but this has only contributed to 5% of workloads. It seems the pandemic has exacerbated work pressures rather than caused them.

### Q: What are the contributing factors to your current workload?



## Case study



**Business:** The [Office of Rail and Road](#) is a non-ministerial government department responsible for the economic and safety regulation of Britain's railways, and the economic monitoring of National Highways.

**Country:** United Kingdom

**Employees:** 350 employees working across the UK with 20 working in a full-service communication function.

**With thanks to:**



Russell Grossman, Director of Communications, Head of Government Internal Communications Profession for the UK Government and Director for Engage for Success

The spectrum of feelings being experienced across the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic is significant. Some people are nervous, anxious, and afraid; while others feel perfectly safe to go about their daily lives. The general sentiment simply mirrors the British public's response to COVID-19 – people either have a rational or emotional response and the ORR is no different. This diversity in the way people feel can bedevil the ORR when it comes to their pandemic response for staff and has meant that communicating effectively with their people has been challenging at times.

### Big enough to matter, small enough to care

The ORR is a relatively small government organisation with a culture that is described as family friendly. The size of the organisation allows leaders to maintain a relatively close watch on the way things happen within the organisation. When the UK went into lockdown in March 2020, the organisation did what most organisations did and **increased its communication with its people**. It was fortuitous that only the year before, the communication technology capability across the organisation had been enhanced, allowing people to work remotely very easily.

Communication then, much like the track of the virus, has never been a linear process. The public wants certainty and there's an expectation that **government authorities should provide certainty even in a sea of uncertainty**. Most governments have found this difficult to do because of the evolving nature of the virus – just look at what happened with the Delta and Omicron variants. Russell is also the ORR's COVID 'Gold Commander' – overseeing the organisation's COVID-19 strategy and direction, including communication. The Gold Team meets weekly and reports to the organisation's executive leadership team every other week about how people are feeling and responding to the ever-changing environment.

Overall, the ORR took a very deliberate communication approach based on employee feedback. Following the initial lockdown in March 2020, the ORR communication team immediately introduced twice-weekly virtual town halls, which achieve no less than a 70% attendance rate. They often begin each town hall by introducing new team members which has proved popular with staff. They use [Slido](#) to manage questions as it is important to allow people to remain anonymous if they wish. There continues to be typically around 40 to 50 questions asked per session. Many questions are about COVID-19 and are often repeated. That's okay because the **act of questioning is a form of catharsis**. Staff are looking for a sense of security and the sessions have opened up the dialogue across the organisation.

The ORR instigated a series of communication protocols as they moved to remote working. They discovered that **remote working was a great leveller for their distributed organisation** – it had never felt inclusive to have a group of people meeting together in London at their headquarters while many others were scattered across the country. So, they asked staff to attend meetings via their laptop, even if they were in the London office. Another ask was for all staff to have their cameras on during meetings because this significantly aids the overall experience and more closely mimics 'in real life.' Backgrounds could be blurred however, as some people found this intrusive.

### Mental wellbeing on the agenda for some time

The ORR, along with the entire UK Civil Service, has for some time now recognised the importance of mental health and wellbeing. It strongly believes that **the wellbeing of an individual leads to a better and more productive environment**. It's no surprise then that productivity at the ORR is generally felt to have increased during the pandemic.

**Most of what the organisation does is produced as a result of cerebral activity – thought, imagination, creativity – so how people are feeling mentally is really important to their performance.**

Prior to the pandemic the organisation had already begun working on their mental wellbeing initiatives, including:

- Training Mental Health First Aiders across the organisation.
- Inviting all senior leaders to complete an e-course on mental health and wellbeing.
- Conducting formal check-ins with employees every quarter.
- Ensuring leaders check-in on their team members regularly (at least once a week) – each leader at the ORR has between 5-10 direct reports. The organisation's view is that if a leader doesn't personally know how their people are doing, then they're not being an effective leader.
- Sharing health and wellbeing insights on the intranet about personal health issues, including women's and men's health, mental health and wellbeing etc., – these pages continue to be some of the most accessed on the intranet.
- Providing staff with a catalogue of equipment that enabled them to choose what they need to work from home effectively, e.g., ergonomic chairs, monitors, headphones, headsets etc.
- Participating in the annual [Rail Wellbeing Live](#) event – an industry-wide event covering a variety of personal health and wellbeing issues. Resources are free to access and download on demand via their Wellbeing Library.
- Actively encouraging people to get vaccinated to protect their health.

Over the course of the pandemic ORR engagement scores have increased by four percentage points, in part due to an increased focus on listening and communication. Overall, ORR employees said they **wanted leaders to listen more than talk**.

### Most people comfortable working from home

One of the reasons the ORR considers its productivity has increased during the pandemic is because people no longer have to commute to work – the [average London commute stands at 74 minutes a day](#). Most people are comfortable working from home, including the communication team, and particularly those with a caring role. They appreciate the time and money they have saved. What is really important at the ORR is for people to feel "on top of the job" and being able to manage workloads. The ORR does not have a policy of banning the sending of emails after hours. It's a personal choice, and the expectation is, "it is under your command". Even so, there are mixed feelings about remote vs onsite working. The organisation learned early on that for some of their people, their colleagues are the only people they have contact with during the course of a typical day.

## Encouraging people to return to the workplace

It's not being at work; it's coming to work that has some people worried. The main issue is the perceived risk of catching COVID-19 on route due to crowding on trains and prior to Omicron masks being voluntary in the UK (although there is little evidence that, with the enhanced cleaning all rail companies put in, the trains themselves are spreading points). Those who have already returned keep their distance from their colleagues with no physical contact or shaking hands.

The ORR is also very deliberate about the language they're using to encourage people to return, opting for: **return to the workplace**, instead of "office", "work", or any other variation to indicate physical location.

The organisation has recently implemented six principles around returning to the workplace. Importantly, they are guidelines rather than rules. In practice, ORR's culture means they are more likely to be followed as a result. They want staff to return to the office a minimum two days a week to align with others across the industry, including railway staff. But these aren't coordinated days, so it's more about what works best for the individual and the business.

Across the UK Civil Service, around 75% of employees have drifted back into the office, leading in places to a **perceived issue of fairness**. People don't want to come in if their colleagues don't have to. The Behavioural Insights team at the UK's Cabinet Office has suggested it's important not to coerce staff back into the workplace as in the long run it's not going to work. The key is to gently nudge them back in – you must pull people in not push them in. The ORR is almost certainly moving to a permanent hybrid working model in the future.

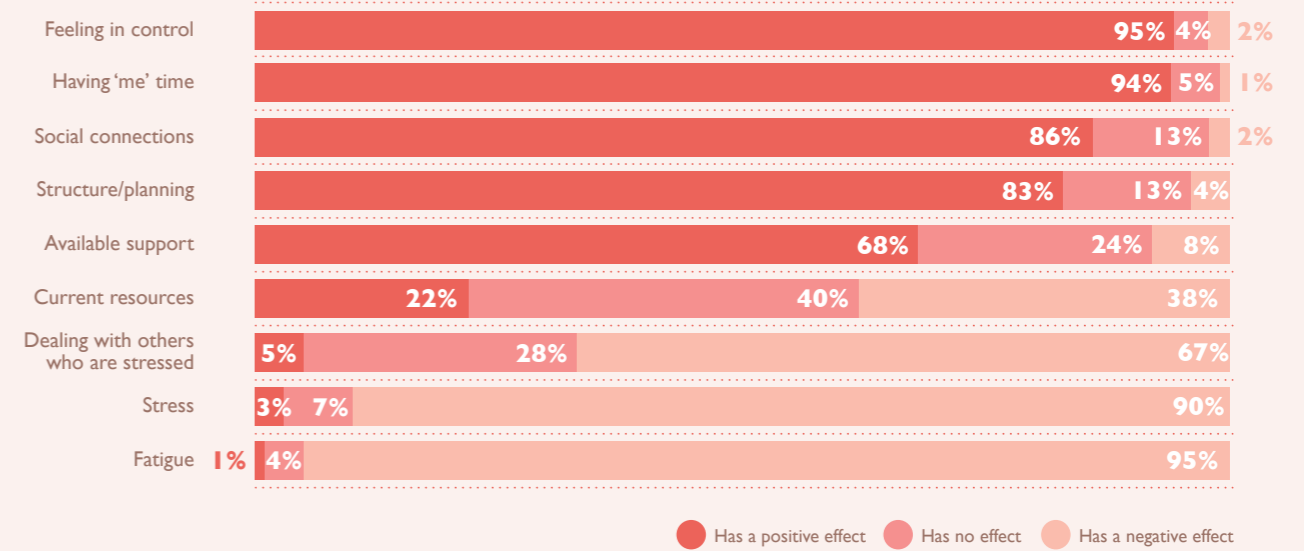
## Russell's two key lessons learned during the pandemic

1. You don't have to be in the workplace to be productive – in fact, in many circumstances, you can be more productive working remotely.
2. Be conscious of what doesn't get asked and what is missing in a remote working environment. There are certainly things you can miss out on by not being together especially for those who are new to the job and haven't had the opportunity to work on site with their colleagues.

# How personal wellbeing is being managed across the profession

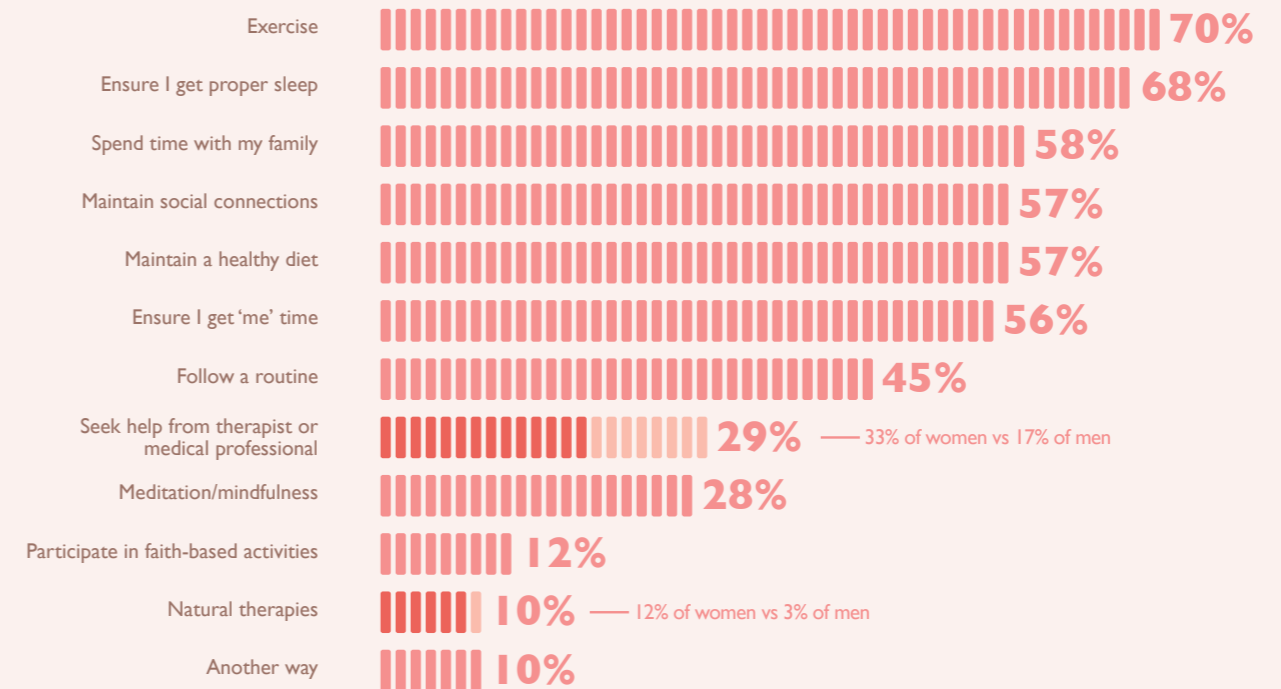
## Fatigue and stress are the biggest contributors to a negative state of wellbeing.

Q: What impacts your mental wellbeing?



## Communication and public relations professionals are taking action to support their mental wellbeing.

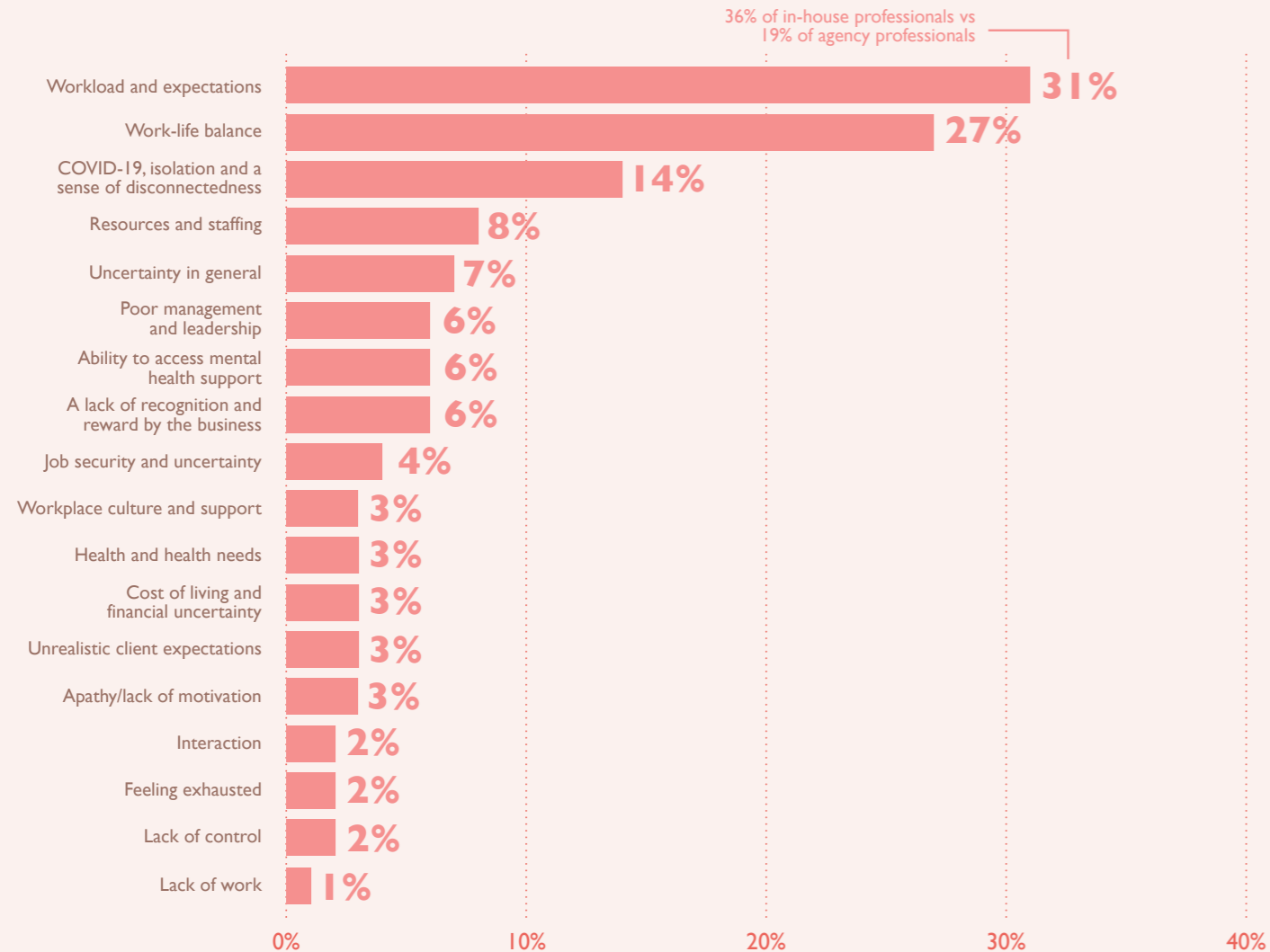
Q: Do you do any of the following to support your mental wellbeing?



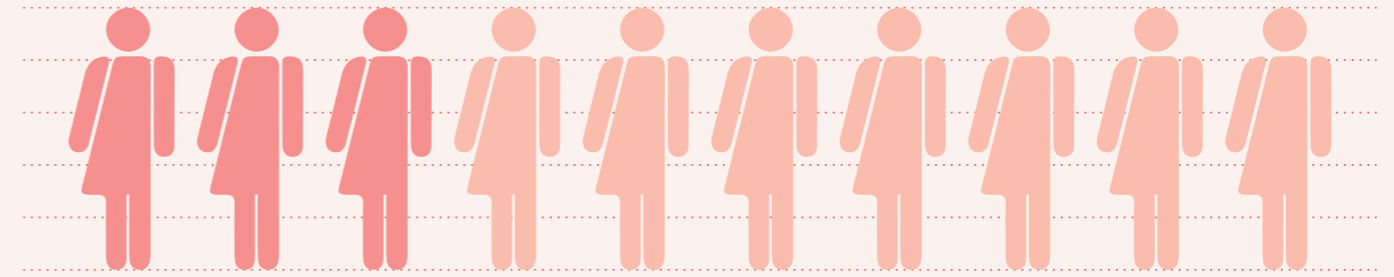
# Barriers to improving mental wellbeing

The barriers to improving mental wellbeing are many and varied. The causes for current workload stress also create barriers to finding solutions. Workload and expectations (31%), lack of work life balance (27%) and COVID-19, isolation, and a sense of disconnectedness (14%) were cited as the top three barriers to improving mental wellbeing.

**Q: What is the biggest barrier to improving your mental wellbeing?**



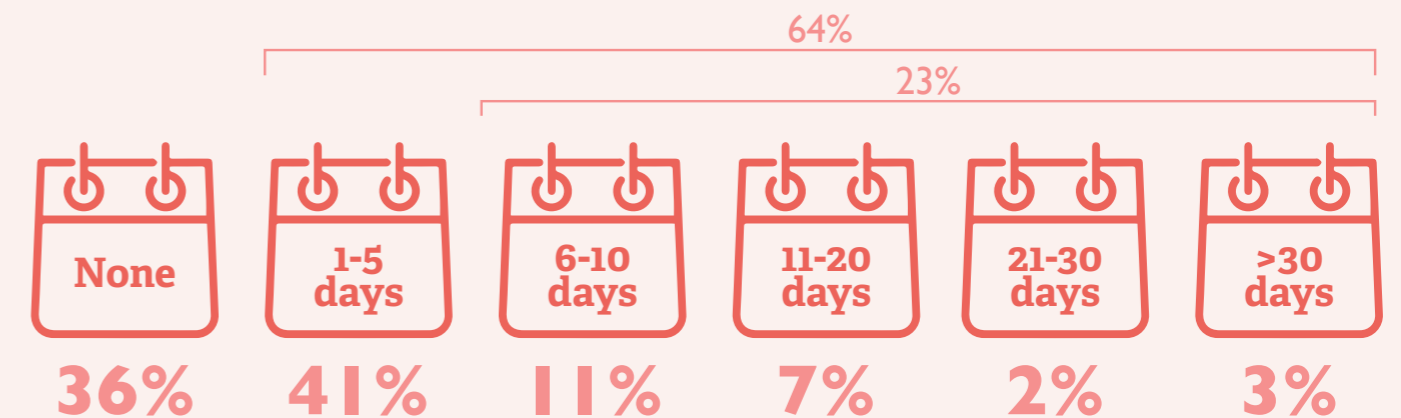
Taking time out and separating personal and work life are critical to managing mental wellbeing. Even before the pandemic this was challenging for some, but remote working has blurred these lines even further, making it harder to switch off. Our survey results indicate that around two-thirds (64%) of communication and public relations professionals have taken leave since the beginning of the pandemic to specifically support their mental wellbeing. This is great news, but concern still exists around the ability to take time out to rest and unwind with around one in three communication and public relations professionals not believing they can take leave from their work to support their mental wellbeing.



**32%** of communication and public relations professionals said they couldn't take time off to improve their mental wellbeing if they needed it.

**Two thirds of communication and public relations professionals have taken leave since the beginning of the pandemic to support their mental wellbeing.**

**Q: How many days leave have you taken since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, to specifically support your mental wellbeing?**



*"I think the **biggest barrier is asking for help** or reaching out for support due to social stigmatisation. Even if I need support I don't want to seem as though I am unreliable or cannot perform at my peak for fear of limitations to succession planning."*

– In-house professional, South Africa

## Case study



**Business:** **Wrap it Up PR & Communications** specialises in communication, public and media relations, publishing, graphic and web design, and web development services for the non-profit and higher education sectors, businesses focused on making a social impact, and government departments.

**Country:** South Africa

**Employees:** An eight-person team of contractors, freelancers, and interns.

**With thanks to:**



Lynne Rippenaar-Moses, Founder and Managing Director

### A mission-driven agency making a real difference

Lynne Rippenaar-Moses established her PR and communication agency in 2013 while working in communication and public relations at Stellenbosch University (SU) – one of South Africa’s “leading tertiary institutions based on research output, student pass rates and rated scientists.” She discovered her love of social sciences while a student and has always believed in the importance of creating opportunities that are otherwise unavailable to minority groups and underprivileged people.

Wrap it Up PR & Communications has a simple but powerful mission – to make a difference in society through its expertise and to support organisations that want to make a positive impact on their communities, their country, and the world. Thus, they only work with non-profits, government departments, and other organisations on projects that create positive change and bring about social good.

One such non-profit organisation includes the **MiDO Foundation**. The foundation develops Digital Technology Hubs at various schools across the Western Cape to empower learners and teachers with the digital skills required to succeed at school, university and in the workplace. The hubs are supervised by Digital Hub Coordinators, unemployed youth who are trained in digital skills through the foundation’s paid, 12-month Digital Citizenship Programme. In a country where youth from disadvantaged communities and under-resourced schools often don’t have the opportunity to learn digital skills, the foundation makes it possible for them to learn to do so.

Lynne firmly believes that her work reflects her values and heart, and as the agency’s founder and managing director, she’s deliberately prioritised social impact, and a strong work-life fit, as the foundation of her agency.

### Storytelling, listening, and relationship building

When the pandemic began Lynne was planning for a huge slump in business. Her initial fears of having little work were short-lived. Clients, who were overrun with internal and external communication demands related to the pandemic, desperately needed extra hands-on-deck to help them to continue communicating about their core missions.

While Wrap it Up’s clients were primarily focused on communicating about their COVID-19 strategies and what that meant for their stakeholders, Lynne and her team stepped in to develop communication that reflected their clients’ missions and impacts, taking into consideration the challenges posed by the pandemic and how it had affected organisations focused on social impact. It was important for the Wrap it Up team to put themselves in the shoes of their clients, to really understand their challenges and the increased pressure they faced to demonstrate how they were delivering on their mandates during a pandemic and would continue making an impact in a changed world. It was the first time Lynne did not have to convince her current and prospective clients to invest in their communication.

*“Instead of always focusing on what’s wrong with the world, I want to highlight and celebrate the many people working for the greater good.”*

While Lynne is aware of the challenges South Africa faces, she wanted Wrap it Up to focus on stories about empowering people and the efforts of non-profits and philanthropic organisations, businesses, government departments and higher education institutions to make a positive impact in the world, often by tackling major social issues against incredible odds.

At a time when the Wrap it Up team was grappling with the pandemic and ongoing lockdowns like everyone else, these stories provided hope and inspiration and were important for their mental wellbeing, bringing the agency’s purpose into sharper focus.

### The building blocks were already there

When Lynne was in her twenties she was diagnosed with depression. When she was in her late thirties she suffered from burnout, but because she was so depressed, she didn’t pick up on the signs. Fast forward to 2020, and Lynne was well-equipped to look out for similar signs when COVID-19 struck. It’s also made her acutely aware of just how important it is to focus on wellbeing, despite a busy workload.

For this reason, Lynne started her own business with the attitude: “I love what I’m doing, but I want my work to fit into my life.” She structured Wrap it Up so that everyone worked remotely right from the beginning. People initially thought this was odd at the time, but when it came to COVID-19 lockdowns, there was no need to convince anyone or change working habits.

In March 2020, South Africa went into a hard lockdown after the first few cases of COVID-19 were detected in the country. Case numbers continued to rise, with many deaths reported for months on end. The economic impact of the lockdowns led to unprecedented unemployment, increased hunger, and poverty. All around Lynne, community members, acquaintances and friends were being diagnosed with COVID-19, with some tragically succumbing to the disease. As at May 2022, there have been more than 101,000 COVID-19 related deaths in South Africa.

With the lockdown restrictions, team members had to juggle more from home – household duties, childcare and even teaching – which made working remotely more challenging, yet helped the team become more conscious of each other’s needs. For Lynne, who has struggled with work-life balance for most of her life, this situation only fuelled that imbalance. Recognising her own struggles, she has constantly reminded the team of Wrap it Up’s working culture – which is: as long as the work gets done by the client’s deadline, then it doesn’t matter how that happens. Lynne’s view is: “If you need to take a long lunch, a day off or a two-hour nap in the middle of the day then that’s fine too.”

Despite the lack of physical connection, the team talks more than ever. Staff are encouraged to speak up about their struggles, question how things are done within the agency, and individual accomplishments are always celebrated. It was also important to Lynne that the team knew she was available for a chat at any time and if a team member was struggling with a client, that the team would “have their back.”

This isn't just lip service either – one-on-one check-ins occur frequently, along with in-person team get-togethers, lockdowns permitting. Recently when doing just that, Lynne discovered that one of her team members had been mugged at gun point while out for a walk, and another had lost a family member to COVID-19. The devastating news was immediately shared with the team, who reached out to their teammates to acknowledge their trauma and provide support. Lynne made a point of checking in with the two team members daily to find out how they were doing and where needed, project deliverables were taken on by others to give the impacted team members space.

Lynne warns that it hasn't always been smooth sailing, but she still believes in the mental health and lifestyle benefits of working remotely and flexibly.

### Lynne's personal wellbeing tips

Lynne has learned the hard way about the importance of managing mental health and wellbeing and that it can be difficult to do when you are the driving force behind your own business.

Here are Lynne's five tips to keep your wellbeing in check:

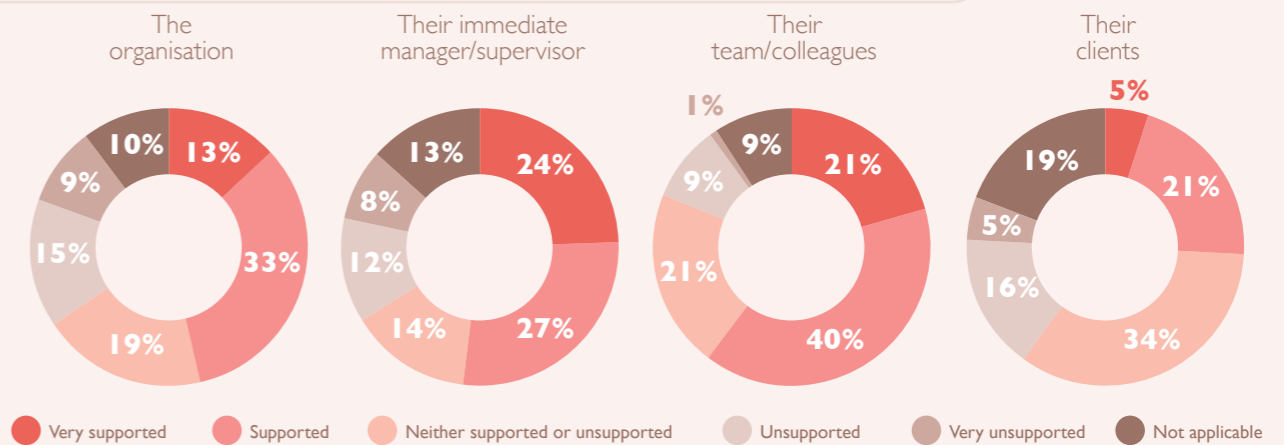
- **Take proper breaks to help you focus:** It may feel counter-intuitive to take a break when you're working against a deadline, but you'll be more productive after a break. [Deep Work](#) by Cal Newport has helped Lynne realise the benefits of being more focused.
- **Get comfortable with vulnerability:** It's perfectly okay to admit you're not okay and to ask for help or take a day off to support your mental wellbeing. This is how Wrap it Up's Operations Manager stepped in to ensure Lynne took proper breaks while on leave. Like Gandalf in *Lord of the Rings*, no one passes by her Operations Manager.
- **Empower others to delegate work:** Don't be afraid to pass the baton – you can't and shouldn't do everything yourself. Empower other team members to prevent bottlenecks and employ freelancers if you need temporary assistance – it frees you up to focus on other critical areas of your business.
- **Keep talking:** Talk to your colleagues like equals and find out what's important to them. This helps everyone feel respected, heard, and comfortable to be themselves.
- **Know your why:** When you know why you are doing something, it's easier to see what really matters and to recognise what to say no to.

*“Entrepreneurs often forget to rest. So, surround yourself with people who'll remind you to do just that. My husband is the one who reminds me to take vacations. Had it not been for him, I may not have taken a vacation in the last two years.”*

## What organisations are doing to support mental wellbeing in the workplace

The results indicate that organisations need to do more to support the mental wellbeing of their employees. While immediate managers and supervisors are seen to provide some support, around one in four (24%) don't feel supported by their organisation. We're encouraged to see the level of support provided by teams and colleagues given organisational culture is a shared responsibility. Overall, in-house professionals reported feeling both *more* and *less* supported than their agency colleagues.

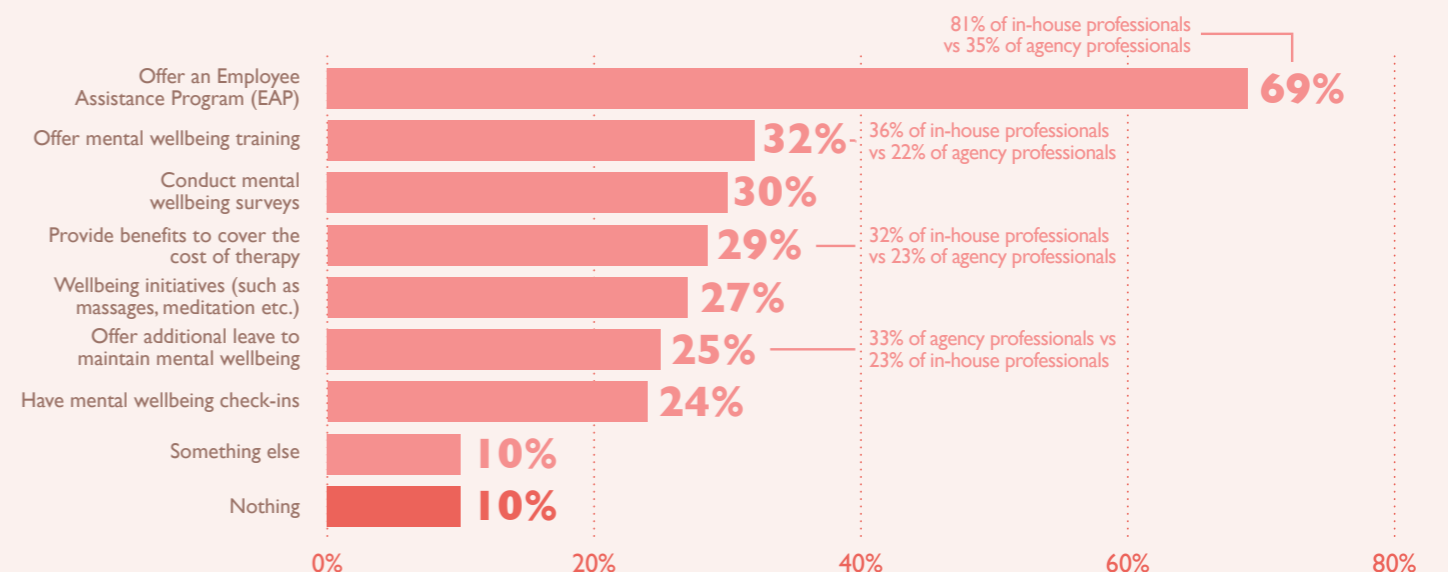
**Q: Thinking about your current mental wellbeing, how supported do you feel?**



It's common practice for organisations to offer their employees access to an Employee Assistance Program, and the communication and public relations professionals who responded to our survey indicated this was the most common form of support offered at their organisations (69%). They also indicated their organisations offer other forms of support including wellbeing training (32%), wellbeing surveys (30%) and help covering therapy costs (29%).

**One in 10 organisations are seen to offer no mental wellbeing support to their employees.**

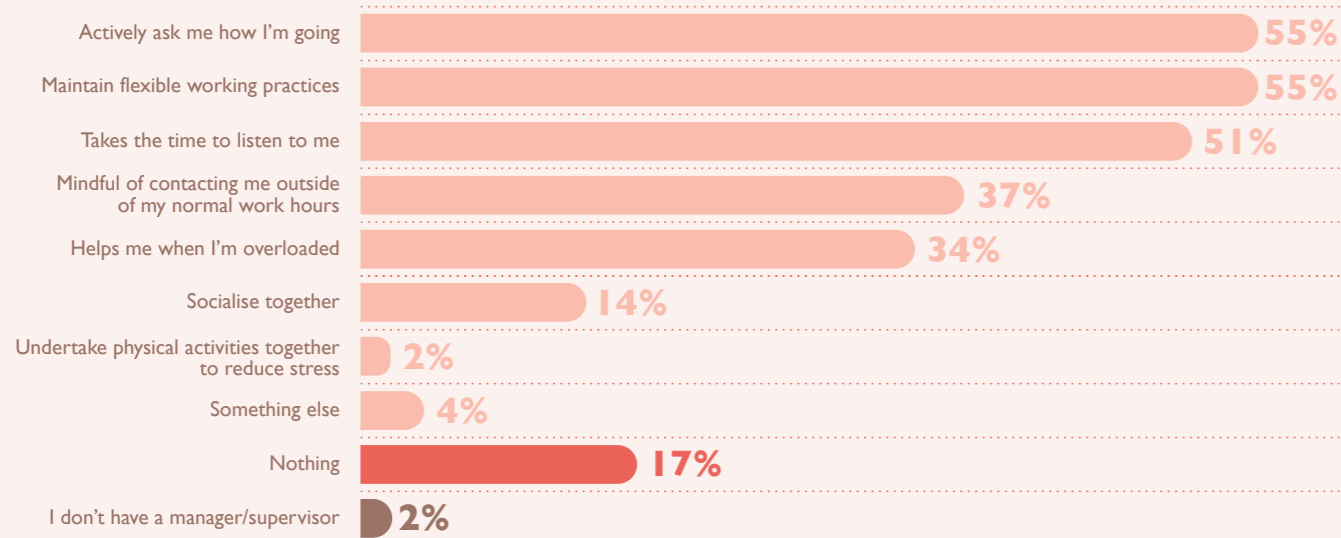
**Q: What if anything, does your organisation do to support your mental wellbeing?**



At a management level, mental wellbeing support is experienced through connections, conversations, and flexible work practices. Respondents said their immediate managers/supervisors support their mental wellbeing by actively asking how I'm going (55%), maintaining flexible working practices (55%), and taking the time to listen to me (51%).

**Almost one in five immediate managers/supervisors are seen to do nothing to support their direct reports.**

**Q: What if anything, does your immediate manager/supervisor do to support your mental wellbeing?**

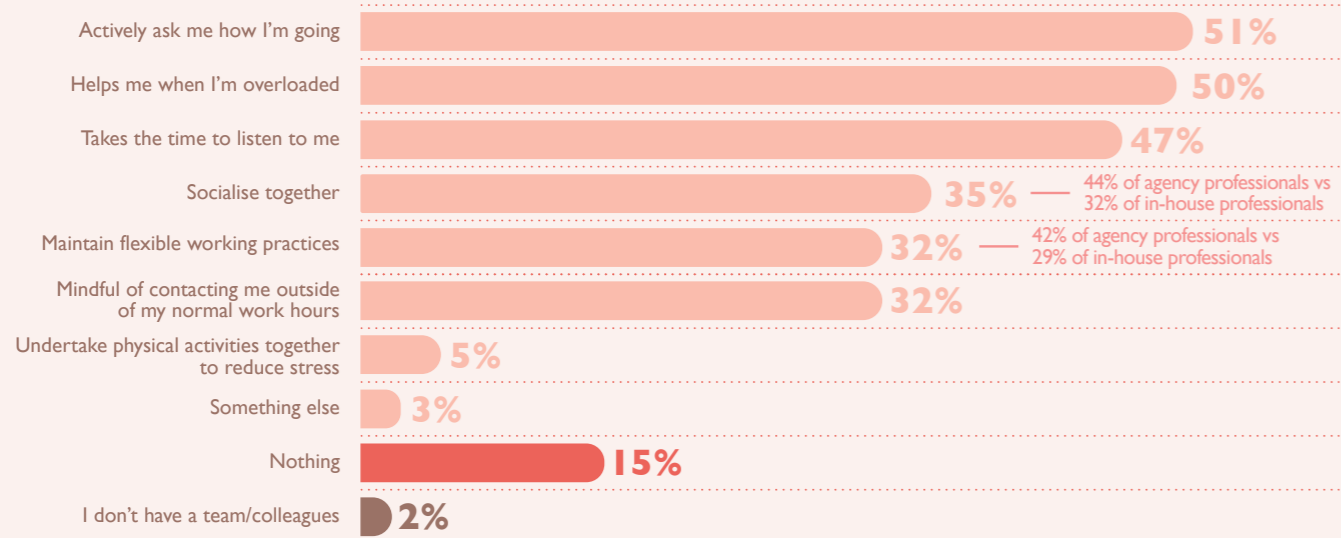


It seems as though we're taking a similar approach with each another, but we're more likely to pitch in and help when our colleagues are overloaded (50%). Sadly, 15% do nothing to support their communication and public relations colleagues.

Respondents indicated they would be more comfortable talking to a colleague (37%) than their immediate manager/supervisor (29%) about their mental wellbeing. In-house professionals are more likely to talk to their immediate manager/supervisor (31%) than their agency colleagues (22%).

**One in five communication and public relations professionals don't feel comfortable talking to anyone about their mental wellbeing.**

**Q: What if anything, does your team or your colleagues do to support your mental wellbeing?**



## Case study

**Business:** Aurecon is a design, engineering and advisory company that brings ideas to life to create a better future for people and the planet. In 2020, the Australian Financial Review named Aurecon Australasia's most innovative company and most innovative professional services company.

**Country:** Asia-Pacific

**Employees:** 6000+ employees with around 40 people working in the Brand, Marketing & Communications team.

**With thanks to:**



Danielle Bond, Group Director, Brand Marketing & Communications

Supporting the physical and mental wellbeing of its employees has been mission critical for Aurecon throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, but this journey began years ago.

*At Aurecon they say, "the only sustainable form of competitive advantage is how we lead our people."*

### Because people depend on you

At Aurecon, they talk about the importance of safety to an individual as well as to the people in their lives. Their partners, children, parents, siblings, friends, co-workers, and even pets all depend on them to keep safe so they can be there for them. When they ask their people to look after themselves, they are also asking them to look out for others.

The organisation is ahead of its time – the health, safety and wellbeing of its people has been the number one priority at Aurecon for many years. In 2015 Aurecon's **Mind Matters** program was **recognised by the Australian Human Resources Institute** as the most outstanding industry contribution to improving awareness, attitudes and understanding of mental health issues among employees in the workplace and the wider community.

The Mind Matters program has two key aims: providing mental health awareness education to all staff and educating line managers to identify and directly support mental health issues in others. At the heart of the program is the **integration of Mental Health First Aid Officers** into the business. Aurecon was one of the first organisations in Australia to purposefully train staff to enable them to identify and directly support mental health issues in others.

The success of Aurecon's commitment to health and wellbeing is measured through Aurecon's regular Employee Pulse survey that includes indicators on mental wellbeing, organisational support, physical and social wellbeing.

In September 2021 Aurecon appointed new health, safety, and wellbeing leaders, including a new Group Director, Health & Safety, to lead the next phase of their global health and safety journey; and a leadership psychologist to focus on optimising the sustainable peak performance of its leaders, who are responsible for delivering growth and stability during a time when the world around them is constantly changing. This includes providing leaders with the right tools and resources so they can support themselves and their teams to develop a more resilient mindset.

Aurecon's rock-solid commitment to workplace health, safety, and wellbeing has recently been **globally recognised** with multiple industry and government awards in Australia, Thailand and New Zealand.



## Aurecon's safety culture in action

Aurecon works hard to understand the experiences of its people and the impact COVID-19 has had on its workforce, including the effects of remote and hybrid working. There is a longstanding flexible working policy at Aurecon, which meant the transition to working from home was easier and less disruptive.

Aurecon's **Mind Matters** program sits at the centre of their wellbeing agenda. There is a Mind Matters Online Hub, managed in partnership between the health and safety, and people teams, which includes access to:

- The Turnaround Mindset podcast.
- A line manager toolkit to help managers support their staff.
- An employee wellbeing toolkit which includes resources and tools for managing personal wellbeing.

Their people's resilience in the face of adversity has been inspiring and the safe sharing of stories is actively encouraged. Every meeting at Aurecon begins with a health, safety, or wellbeing moment, where people are invited to share their personal stories and experiences. People are encouraged to be open and vulnerable, sharing stories about near misses at work, as well as stories about personal matters such as suicide and loss within the family. Some of these stories are published on the intranet, while others are shared during quarterly "CEO on the couch" virtual town halls. They are fast becoming the most popular content shared internally.

In February 2022, Aurecon launched a series of fortnightly events aimed at exploring high performance and wellbeing. The **Thriving Together** series is delivered under the stewardship of the company's leadership psychologist, alongside a team of passionate mental health advocates who share a deep curiosity about psychology in the workplace.

## The COVID-19 communication shift

From the beginning of the pandemic Aurecon set out to be true to their long-stated position that health and safety was their number one priority. They wanted to 'walk the talk' of their strategy and culture in everything they said and did. Their key messages focused on:

**Build trust in our leaders ... show empathy ... be reliable and timely ... walk the talk of our strategy and culture in everything we do ... keep our staff informed as we shape our response to the crisis ... engage our staff to tackle challenges.**

In response, Aurecon set about creating a single source of truth around their key messages and position on all facets of managing through the pandemic. The COVID-19 Resource Hub sits on the intranet homepage and houses the most trustworthy and up-to-date information on:

- Health, safety, and wellbeing
- IT guide for working remotely
- Working arrangements
- Government alerts and Aurecon travel updates
- The ultimate guide to working remotely
- International SOS – medical and travel security services
- COVID-19 symptoms and tips

They used a combination of email, intranet, video, and virtual events with staff to get the message out. Feedback loops and a regular Employee Pulse survey through **Workday Peakon Employee Voice** helped them adjust tactics. The surveys highlighted the challenges the workforce was having in maintaining boundaries between work and home responsibilities and living a physically healthy lifestyle. This was a key focus for 2021.

## Earning your commute

Aurecon is already piloting a new approach to flexible working, taking the opportunity to reimagine what a physical office workplace will look like in the future. They fully accept that some people will always prefer to work from home and are actively designing workspaces that "earn your commute." Above all, Aurecon is empowering its leaders to recognise that they're going to have to lead differently and think uniquely about how their people will collaborate on common projects in a post-COVID-19 world.

## The resilience to stretch not snap

In the early days of the pandemic the Brand, Marketing & Communications team held weekly meetings where anyone could turn up to play games, have a bit of fun and stay connected. These meetings have morphed over time and are less frequent, but the feeling of being connected and engaged is still a key focus for the team.

Danielle has invested more in strengthening her team in the past year, ensuring they have the right mix of people, with the right skill set and capabilities. As the head of the function, she's also helping the team make choices around priorities, so they have some control over their work and when and how they work.

**"This isn't going to be our first or only challenge. We have to build a resilient workforce that can deal with uncertainty and still be high performing. There has to be a skill set, a mindset, a culture that supports that. It can't be a culture that says: 'we'll take all the worry and protect you'"**

Even so, the function's leadership team has felt responsible for delivering on the organisation's recently launched two-year business growth strategy while working on the communication and engagement work brought about by COVID-19. They've borne the brunt of the workload and Danielle admits she and the function's communication leaders could have done more to role model work-life balance practices.

**"COVID-19 communication was like working on a massive project that came out of nowhere, but we weren't really able to wind back on anything else."**

They are collectively determined to work smarter, not harder in 2022. The team will outsource some of their work to focus on becoming true strategic and trusted advisors to the business and its stakeholders.

**"You've either got to show your return on investment so you can command more resources or make smarter choices about what you work on."**

### What Danielle has learned during the past two years

- **People look to you for cues on how to behave** – role model the behaviour you want to see. If you don't want people working after hours, don't send emails at night or on the weekends.
- **Calls have benefits** – prioritise 1:1 discussions with your people. They create space for more meaningful time together.
- **Learn from other organisations** – it's critical. These are unprecedented times – plug into your networks and learn from others dealing with the same challenges.
- **Invest in your people and their careers** – you'll have credit in the bank when times are tough. High performance breeds high performance.
- **Prioritise mental health and wellbeing** – give people the space they need to talk (or not talk) about it. But you must be a good listener and observer – so check in to see how people in your team are doing, because if they go quiet it often means they're doing it tough.

## What communication and public relations professionals want from their organisations

*“Simply being there and having my back, working alongside me, being forgiving about the stress and (sometimes) errors.”*

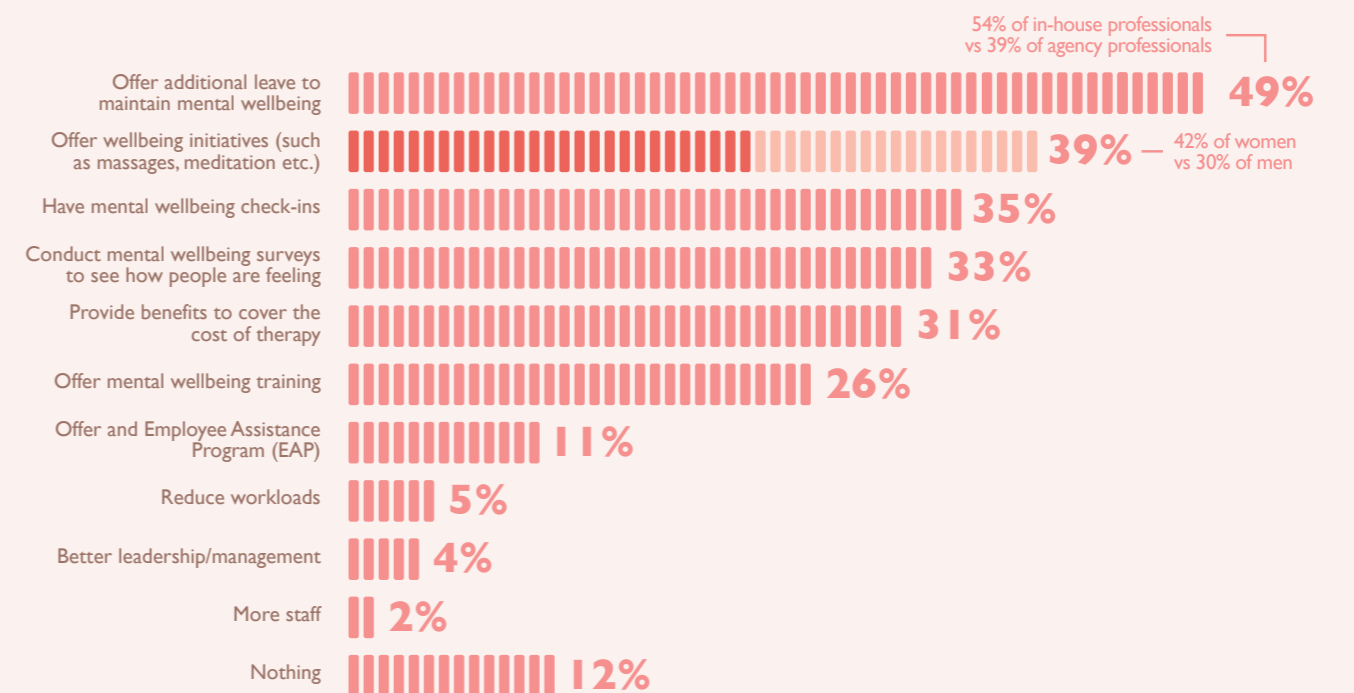
– In-house professional, United States



There is clearly a gap between what organisations offer to support their employees' mental wellbeing, versus what employees actually want. Only 11% of respondents said they wanted access to an Employee Assistance Program. What they indicated they wanted was greater flexibility and resources to boost their wellbeing in the form of additional leave to maintain their mental wellbeing (49%), wellbeing initiatives such as massages and meditation classes (39%) and mental wellbeing check-ins (35%).

**In other words, organisations need to listen more closely to what their employees want and need when it comes to mental wellbeing support.**

Q: Which of the following would you like your organisation to offer to support your mental wellbeing?



**“Unlimited personal time off, access to the Modern Health platform and counselling, global weeks of rest to ensure the whole organisation is able to switch off.”**

– In-house professional, Australia

Let's be clear, there are some organisations, including those with whom we spoke and highlighted in the case studies that are listening and effectively supporting the wellbeing of their employees.

**“We have strong and inspiring leadership with high emotional intelligence and mentoring.”**

– Agency Professional, United Kingdom

**“Our organisation demonstrates strong principles of minding the pace, the value of self-care and mental care. The organisation is very aware of burnout potential and actively supports staff to avoid it, gives staff-wide extra time off with long weekends, etc. It is exceptional.”**

– In-house professional, Canada

## Case study



**Business:** HubSpot is a leading customer relationship management (CRM) platform that provides software and support to help companies grow better.

**Country:** Headquartered in the United States (with 13 global offices).

**Employees:** 5,500+ employees

**With thanks to:**



Mia MacKinnon, Manager, Brand and Public Relations, APAC

### Normalising mental health and wellbeing

HubSpot is very intentional when it comes to checking in on the wellbeing of its people. They obsess over their culture, just like their product – because they recognise that culture is a product. HubSpot's view is “culture happens whether we like it or not, so why not create a culture we love.”

When it comes to mental health and wellbeing, HubSpot is proactively creating a working culture and environment that normalises the topic of mental wellbeing, and encourages the engagement and use of the support on offer. HubSpot's goal is to, “help you be the best ‘you’ that you can be, both inside and outside of work.”

Prior to the global pandemic HubSpot had a broad range of wellbeing support mechanisms in place for their employees. These initiatives included Employee Assistance Programs, and support across the dimensions of wellbeing – mental, physical, financial, social, environmental, and occupational. The organisation also has a number of employee resource groups to foster an inclusive workplace, including LGBTQ+ Alliance, Families@HubSpot, People of Colour at HubSpot, BLACKhub, and Women@HubSpot.

Since the pandemic, the organisation has a heightened awareness about supporting their global workforce who have been impacted in different ways and at different times.

**“Burnout was being felt across the company – for a multitude of reasons – and this led to very intentional practices and programming to support our workforce.”**

HubSpot conducts a quarterly eNPS (Employee Net Promoter Score) survey to measure employee sentiment about the company. The survey includes questions about how employees are feeling, what the organisation can do better, and what people need at that point in time. It's designed to increase understanding about people's needs and preferences, what leaders need to do to act and what's really going to help amid such uncertainty and unpredictability.

The results speak for themselves:

- 97% of employees on [Glassdoor](#) recommend HubSpot
- #1 Company for Women by [Comparably](#)
- Best Workplaces for Parents in 2020 by [Great Place to Work®](#)
- #4 Best Place to Work in 2021 by [Glassdoor](#)
- 2022 Culture Champion by [MIT Sloan Management Review](#)

### Employees are treated like people, not line items

HubSpot acknowledges that its employees are whole people, with families, hobbies, and lives outside of work. They work remotely, keep non-traditional hours, and use unlimited vacation time to create work-life “fit.” Their [employee benefits](#) are truly impressive.

The organisation has implemented a plethora of new initiatives to support its employees during the pandemic – some of these have a direct impact on mental wellbeing, and others are more peripheral, including:

**A mobility policy** to assist their global and geographically dispersed workforce who live and work away from their usual home base. The policy enables employees to temporarily relocate to a country where they can legally work in order to spend time with their families.

The introduction of [HubSpot Unplugged](#), an initiative driven by employee feedback, which includes three key components to help with burnout:

- **Global Week of Rest:** In 2020, the organisation had regional Global Days of Rest, which was a dedicated day off from work. In 2021 HubSpot made 5–9 July a company holiday week for all employees to take time off and recharge. The deliberate move to make this an organisation-wide event meant people felt they could genuinely take time off, without worrying about returning to an overflowing inbox, missing key meetings, or dipping into their annual leave entitlements. Employee feedback was so positive that the organisation has made this an annual commitment.
- **No Internal Meeting Fridays:** HubSpot encourages employees not to book internal meetings on Friday to help combat Zoom fatigue and restore some positive Friday energy. Employees are encouraged to use good judgement for what that looks like for their teams and meetings with their customers and business partners.
- **More Mental Health Programming:** HubSpot has added to their existing mental health and wellbeing programming through [Modern Health](#) – a wellness platform launched in January 2021 offering a personalised combination of digital programs, group learning and 1:1 coaching and therapy to help employees and their families feel more resilient, productive, and empowered at work and at home. According to a recent article in [PR Newswire](#), 30% of employees are already actively using the benefits of Modern Health – a far higher engagement rate than traditional Employee Assistance Programs, which tend to see an engagement rate of around 1%-3%. Of those employees who have used Modern Health’s benefits, almost half (44%) have engaged in one-to-one care with either a coach or therapist and half (50%) have used Modern Health’s suite of in-app evidence-based digital programs. More than a third (39%) have actively engaged in meditations. The organisation is also hosting additional programs for employees to listen, learn, and identify ways to prioritise their mental health at work.

### Leaders leaving loudly at HubSpot

Leaders at HubSpot believe it’s their job to show their employees that taking time off isn’t just encouraged, it’s critical – and they model the behaviour they want to see. So, the organisation encourages their leaders to announce when they’re leaving early and why. It’s this seemingly small gesture about looking after yourself, taking time out and acknowledging vulnerability, that has a big impact on HubSpot’s culture.

This practice extends to the marketing and communication function with leaders in the function reinforcing the importance of ‘tools down’ days or no meeting days/weeks to enable people to rest without feeling pressured or like they’re missing out if they’re not at work or always ‘switched on.’ Psychological safety is important to the marketing and communication function, and it’s having a profound impact on the team’s openness to have candid conversations about wellbeing, how they’re coping and feeling, and encouraging people to look after themselves.

Having come from a more traditional workplace where people are at their desks all day, it took Mia some time to adjust to hearing and seeing her manager and team members announce they’d be in late because they were going for a cycle, taking an extended lunch break to get a haircut, or taking Friday off to recharge – but it helped her to practice leaving loudly too.

### Taking care of business and each other

The increase in pressure for marketing and communication and public relations professionals stems in part from their drive to succeed and their determination to have a positive impact on their business. Even more important, is their desire to help their customers and the business community during such a challenging time. But this has meant people have felt overloaded and overwhelmed at times.

To help maintain a healthy balance the marketing and communication team makes taking time off work a priority, using HubSpot’s unlimited vacation time policy to take planned long weekends and full weeks off work to unwind, whether that was for a short domestic trip or just to stay home and focus on their personal wellbeing.

The team has also kept a ‘check in’ on their 1:1 meeting agenda each week. If people didn’t need it, it wasn’t a forced conversation, but it created a safe space to have the conversation if necessary.

### The important lesson Mia learned about managing through COVID-19

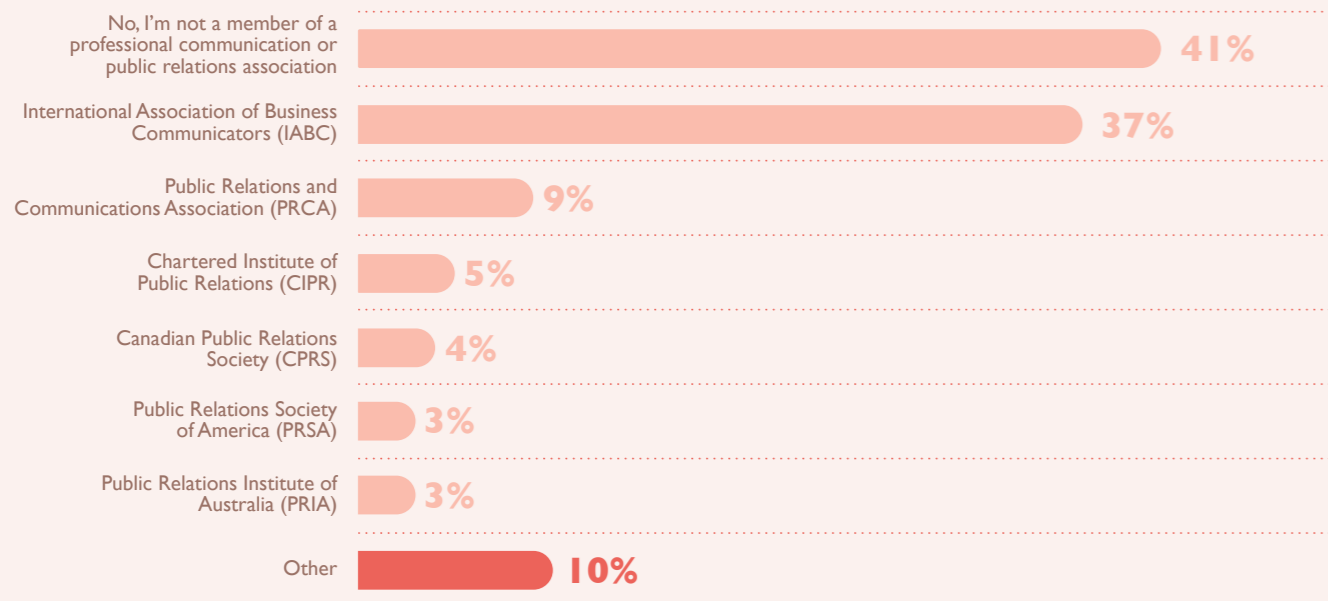
*“Proactive management of your personal wellbeing is critical. It’s easy to push down or ignore the feeling of always being tired or worn out when we’re busy, and even more so when we’re stuck at home during a pandemic. You reason with yourself that you’re not doing much, you’re just at home – so how can you be exhausted and drained?”*

*I know this is what I told myself in the first few months of the pandemic. I was also in the first few months of a new job at HubSpot, so I was already busy learning and onboarding into my new role. Once I acknowledged that feeling worn out didn’t just come from being ‘busy.’ I began to proactively manage my wellbeing. This included getting enough sleep, making space for exercise, practicing gratitude with my husband, and finding ways to maintain social connection.”*

# What communication and public relations professionals expect from their professional associations

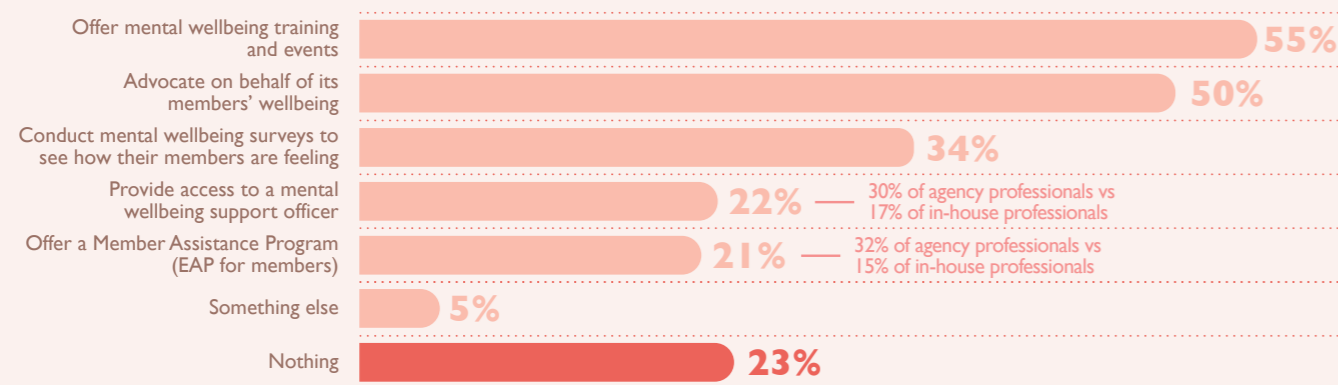


**Q: Are you a member of a professional communication or public relations association?**



Communication and public relations professionals expect more practical support and resources from their professional associations, with mental wellbeing training and events (55%) and advocating on behalf of members' wellbeing (50%) topping their list of expectations.

**Q: When it comes to mental wellbeing, what kind of support do you expect from your professional association?**



**Almost one in four communication and public relations professionals don't expect any support from their professional association.**

## Case study



**Business:** **Zest Learning** is a consultancy that helps organisations in the areas of workplace wellbeing and vitality, creative thinking solutions and frontline leadership skills and competencies.

**Country:** Australia and New Zealand

**Employees:** Three

**With thanks to:**



Robert Hart – Founder of Zest Learning

Uncontrolled certainty intertwined with complexity creates the perfect mental health storm. A survey in the medical journal **The Lancet** on how we're collectively coping through the COVID-19 pandemic indicates that when we experience a significant event that disrupts our normal state of operation, it cuts deeper.

### An evidence-based approach

People are working longer hours. According to Microsoft, we are spending an extra 90 minutes a day using applications because there is no hard stop for commuting. This, combined with home schooling, job insecurity, not being able to get people on site, quarantine challenges and managing organisational restructures, has increased the level of anxiety for many Zest Learning clients and their employees.

The **2021 Smiling Mind State of Mind survey white paper** shows a significant shift in the mental health and wellbeing of Australians. It reveals that four in five out of 2,000 participants reported experiencing stress, anxiety, or depression this past year. However, on the upside, awareness of the importance of maintaining good mental health is at an all-time high: mental health is the country's top non-COVID-19 health concern, with Australians overwhelmingly considering it to be as important as physical health (89%).

In the past the solution to managing mental health and wellbeing was to give people resilience training but that was never enough and certainly isn't anymore.

*"I have seen a human energy crisis over the last 10 years. The fashion for resilience does not belong in 2020."*

### Taking mental health and wellbeing seriously

When mental health has C-suite sponsorship and is identified as a risk that makes a difference. Mental health is seen as an issue on the board papers with the Health and Safety teams and other functions providing measures connected to wellbeing initiatives.

Prior to the pandemic, work to support mental wellbeing was passive – with tip sheets, external people giving talks etc., but no-one really investigated what the employees of the organisation needed or wanted. **One of the fundamental elements of communication is to know your audience** so a needs-based analysis is essential. This should include organisation-wide team focus groups where people have the opportunity to share challenges and discuss workable solutions. It is important to establish a system to gather anonymous feedback such as the continuous **Mentimeter** word cloud Robert maintained for one of his clients.

This helps illustrate to people that they aren't alone in what they are feeling. The outcome of a needs analysis is to develop a bespoke wellbeing curriculum, where teams can choose wellbeing topics, targeted to their needs and interests.

### A multi-channel program

Zest Learning has educated many of its clients to recognise that people's needs are different when it comes to mental wellbeing, and each receives and absorbs information in different ways. His advice? **Be brave and get people excited about wellbeing.** Importantly **don't over saturate, it must be opt-in.**

Wellbeing education and support should be offered and communicated in a number of ways. Below are some examples of what Robert has implemented for one of Zest Learning's clients:

- **Whole-of-organisation events via live webinar:** on topics such as super sleep, all-day energy, mental fitness, emotional agility etc. On average 680 people attended per 45-minute session. The measures show that participation rates are higher when you have someone in-house, sharing their lived experience.
- **Virtual mental wellbeing town halls:** three leaders are allocated five minutes each to talk about their mental health challenges. They're personal and demonstrate how important wellbeing is to the organisation.
- **Team workshops:** based on See, Solve, Share open discussions about what to hold onto and what to let go.
- **Publications:** An organisation-wide industry magazine which includes wellbeing messages and a separate wellbeing monthly e-magazine. The magazines include personal stories from the senior management team and a wealth of information about wellbeing. It has a readership of 900 people per month (in an organisation of around 3,700 employees).
- **Better Mental Health podcast series:** discussions with guests on various topics connected to mental health and wellbeing.
- **Wellbeing Yammer channel:** an opportunity for employees to discuss and share information about wellbeing.
- **A Coach in Your Corner:** is the rebranded Employee Assistance Program which provides proactive support and advice including financial and career assistance.
- **Weekly video with the C-suite:** for people to talk about what's on their mind including wellbeing.
- **My Mental Fitness App:** is an evidence-based app to drive mental fitness for individuals and teams. It provides access to a range of tips, ideas and activities based on individual assessments with weekly quizzes to keep engagement high and an ongoing focus on wellbeing.

All activities are integrated into the communication calendar and aligned with both business-as-usual communication and change/project communication.

### Finding their inner strength

The client's communication function has had to balance the ongoing demands of the pandemic with their business-as-usual work and the communication for a company demerger. The past two years have increased their level of fatigue and left many feeling flat and seeking new ways to respond to ongoing change.

Having ongoing access to a wellbeing expert to enable open discussions about how the team is feeling and how individuals within the team are feeling, has been critical. This also provides an opportunity for the team to identify ways they can support one another, to ensure that in addition to focusing on employee needs, they look after their own as well.

### Psychological safety is key

Robert's client understands that improving mental wellbeing involves more than one element and requires more than a one-off intervention, such as participating in **R U OK? Day**. While the organisation supports this well-known initiative, they have made a concerted effort to create a psychologically safe workplace where people, including with the executive, can speak up and have open and honest discussions about what's important to them. As a result, its employees are emboldened to speak up and collaborate with other teams and functions to support employee wellbeing.

### Robert's personal tips for supporting your mental wellbeing

- **Routine:** It's important to have a routine. Set in place some foundational things that won't change such as bed and wake up time, food, and snack times.
- **Commute:** Create a fake commute so you feel like you're leaving home. Perhaps go to the local coffee shop before you start work from home.
- **Work clothes:** Put work clothes on and even a lanyard. Research shows that it helps shape your focus and perform better when you dress for the task.
- **Exercise:** This doesn't have to be a full work out and can be a short walk – perhaps to the local shops.
- **Sleep:** Have a break from devices before bed and establish a sleep routine.
- **Mindfulness:** Smiling Mind, Headspace, Calm are all great apps, but you can just simply sit and go through your five senses – name five things you can see, four things you can hear, three things you can smell, two things you can feel and one thing you can taste.
- **Take a break:** Break up the workday, step away from your desk – mini breaks are better than one long break.

### The psychological contract between employer and employee has changed

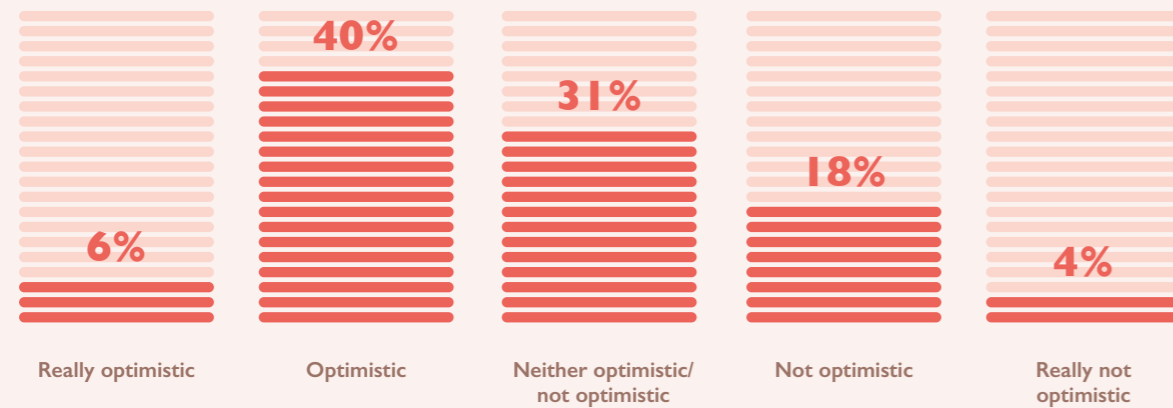
Zest Learning is now experiencing a heightened demand to support the 'hybrid workplace' era, as offices and workplaces reconfigure their approach to how, when and where work gets done.

Along with managing COVID-19, the flexible workplace from home, the office or elsewhere, is a significant and ongoing change management process in itself. Arguably this is the most transformational change in workplace culture in decades. Underestimate the importance at your peril of having a clear and present team charter, open dialogue on what works for each person and their leader. Be prepared to be curious, rather than judgemental. The workplaces able to embrace and promote flexibility are the workplaces with greatest retention, loyalty, discretionary effort, and innovation.

# How communication and public relations professionals feel about the future

Only 46% of communication and public relations professionals feel optimistic about their mental wellbeing. Agency professionals feel more optimistic (57%) than their in-house colleagues (42%).

**Q: Thinking about everything you have experienced in 2021, how do you feel about your mental wellbeing going into 2022?**



## What next?

There is a sense that communication and public relations professionals are 'on hold.' We want to feel optimistic, but around each corner there seems to be something else happening that adds to our workload and increases our stress levels. All of this impacts our already fragile mental wellbeing.

But with optimism, there is always hope. We feel optimistic about others caring for our wellbeing. We know this, as there are organisations that are working with us to do better. The case studies in this report highlight that, in the organisations which are actively working towards creating a working culture that normalises mental health, people feel more connected and safer. Research demonstrates that these types of organisations have higher performing employees and a healthier bottom line.

How can organisations make this happen? By **prioritising listening**. Organisations that ask their people how they're feeling, encourage business leaders to get to know how their people are feeling, and provide the resources to support their people, are getting it right.

Organisations need a business strategy that includes mental wellbeing, and an approach that focuses on helping people to **get well, stay well, and be the best they can be**. This support should incorporate mental wellbeing training, accessible resources, and policies that allow flexible working arrangements.

We've asked some hard questions, taken a good look at ourselves, and are encouraged to hear about initiatives that could help communication and public relations professionals around the world. There are going to be more questions. Your voice is important in shaping the support you need and expect as we all find steady ground again. It's what we want organisations to do, and business leaders to support. This means we need to role model the behaviours we want to see that support a psychological safe environment **where we thrive**. Because we really are **stronger together**.

*“The cure for burn out is not self-care, it’s all of us caring for each other.”*

*Emily and Amelia Nagoski  
Authors, Burnout: The Secret to Solving the Stress Cycle*

# Contributors

## CSCE

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At the Centre for Strategic Communication Excellence, we ignite the courage of communication professionals to inspire and create a better society. We do this by enabling individuals and teams to realise their full potential and embrace the extraordinary value strategic communication brings to their organisations, themselves, and our profession.



### **Sia Papageorgiou FRSA, SCMP** **Managing Partner, CSCE**

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Sia is a multi-award-winning strategic communication consultant and trainer on a mission to elevate the value and visibility of communication and public relations professionals, and help them become trusted, strategic, and in-demand advisors. In 2021 the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) named her Asia-Pacific's Communicator of the Year.



### **Helen Taylor** **Senior Communication Consultant, CSCE**

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A strategist who loves to write, Helen is an IABC Gold Quill Award winner, evaluator, and past Victorian chapter president. She has 20+ years global experience working across communication disciplines, industries and cultures on complex issues including mergers and acquisitions, and the precursor to the current pandemic, the Swine Flu (H1N1).



### **Julie Gillespie BCom, EMBA, MHFA** **Mental Wellbeing Consultant**

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Julie's mental wellbeing work is grounded in over 25 years of business leadership experience and technical training, supported by an Executive Master of Business Administration. She's an accredited Principal Master Mental Health First Aid Instructor, with credentials in the science and practice of wellbeing.

## Antenna

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Antenna believes effective research is as much about communicating insights as finding them, so our approach places equal emphasis on what we discover and how we say it. We conduct quantitative and qualitative projects employing proven methodologies, tailored to meet our clients' needs, which include some of the world's major brands.



### **Sam Blaxland** **Director, Antenna**

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Sam is a seasoned researcher who works best with organisations that truly value the insights consumers bring to the table. For more than 20 years he's worked alongside major Australian and international brands, in retail, fast-moving consumer goods, finance, telecommunications, government, personal care, advertising, brand and new product development.



### **Brett Gumbley** **Director, Antenna**

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Brett is a skilled market researcher and business manager with a wealth of experience in research field management and the application of emerging technology to research problems. He works with some of the world's leading brands (Qantas, McDonalds, MasterCard, Target, and Kraft to name a few), to track the customer experience, check brand health and measure campaign effectiveness.



We're **confident** that communication has the power to be a force for good in society.

We're **passionate** about developing communication professionals and organisations.

We're **opinionated** about what our profession can achieve.

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