Introduction

After two years of Covid-19, we’re entering a new era of work. Here at The Thrive Lab, we wanted to understand more about the challenges organisations are facing around wellbeing, so that we can help you figure out what is working, what is not working, and what else needs to be done.

We asked, and you shared! Between September and December 2021, we surveyed 80 organisations of different sizes (40% of which had over 500 employees) and across a range of sectors including professional services, healthcare, manufacturing and education. We asked a series of questions to gauge how Covid had impacted workplace wellbeing, and what was being done to manage it. A huge thanks to all those who responded and shared what was happening.

This report presents some of the key themes and findings alongside expert opinion and analysis. We hope that the insights are helpful for when it comes to thinking about workplace wellbeing in your own organisation.
A Message From One of Our Directors

There is no doubt that the last couple of years have put the concept of wellbeing into the spotlight.

Here at The Thrive Lab, we have long been aware of the link between wellbeing at work and the success of an organisation. Now, more than ever before, this is being recognised by HR managers, CEOs and leaders. Not only this, but employees are wanting to work for companies that align with their values, invest in their people and create a sense of belonging and trust (McKinsey & Co. 2021).

As we enter a new era of work, we have some wonderful opportunities to co-create and redefine work in a way that puts people at the heart of business. However, navigating through this period of change brings its own challenges. Over the past 18 months we have been working with clients who are exhausted, uncertain and struggling to cope with the personal and professional challenges that the pandemic has brought. We have seen organisations trying their best to react to the need for wellbeing support but without clear strategy or insight into what is needed. Consequently, engagement, impact and costs are negatively affected which tarnishes the ideal of creating wellbeing at work in the future.

Our mission at The Thrive Lab is to help individuals and organisations thrive. We have a vision where the world of work offers people a chance: to make the best of their talents, look after their health, create meaningful relationships and continue to learn whilst feeling valued and able to express themselves without fear or shame.

We believe that creating wellbeing in the workplace is about supporting individuals, teams, leaders and organisations so that a culture of care, connection and compassion runs alongside the need to get business done. However, we also know that this is sometimes easier said than done and that the collective stress and uncertainty of a pandemic can do much to affect this.

This report takes the results from our survey to look at some of the common themes that are impacting wellbeing in the workplace. It also reflects on some of the positive changes that have occurred as a result of the last few years that you might want to maintain as you think about how to continue to improve wellbeing at work in 2022.

Alison Durkin, Director

Now is the time to shift our priorities and put people at the heart of how we do business.
Headline Results

The good news is that the data shows an overall current feeling of positivity within the organisations we surveyed. Respondents also reported that there was an overall sense of community and collaboration in their organisations.

In stark contrast, however, some of the responses indicated that there were significant challenges to people’s wellbeing, and how organisations were trying to help. Our results indicate the following:

01. People want connection

Isolation and loneliness are cited as the biggest issue for individuals, and organisations are missing the ability to network and form relationships. At the same time, communication has increased, with organisations making more of an effort to talk about wellbeing in team meetings and 1:1s. Despite these efforts, people are still struggling to connect and make meaningful relationships which is negatively impacting their sense of wellbeing.

02. Stress and burnout are high

Increased levels of stress and burnout are the biggest wellbeing challenges faced by organisations. Increased stress, feelings of exhaustion and feeling unable to take a break were key problems identified by individuals responding to our survey. Despite the pandemic having had a positive impact on some people’s work life balance, this seems to have done little to mitigate overall stress levels.

03. Wellbeing is on the agenda

Some good news: more organisations are focusing on wellbeing than before the pandemic and have implemented a range of interventions in their strategies. However, there is still little in place to measure the effectiveness of their efforts, and to demonstrate the benefits and impacts on employees.
Relationships & Connection: Key Stats

Communication and collaboration under pressure?

- 64% of all respondents report an increase in the level of communication but only 22% feel it is more effective.
- 69% of all respondents say that loneliness and isolation have had a negative impact on their wellbeing.
- 50% of organisations are missing the opportunity to network and build relationships.
- 31% are finding it hard to maintain team collaboration.

THE THRIVE LAB
WORKPLACE WELLBEING REPORT 2022
**Relationships & Connection: The Results**

**People are stressed and struggling to connect**

**What challenges is your organisation experiencing due to changes in working practices?**

- Increased levels of stress and burnout
- Lack of opportunity to network and build relationships
- Maintaining motivation
- Onboarding new members
- Reduction in team collaboration
- Retention of team members

**Percentage of respondents %**

![Bar Chart](image)

**But work life balance has improved**

**What gains has your organisation experienced due to changes in working practices?**

- Improved work life balance
- Reduced expenditure
- Efficiency
- More productive working environment
- Ability to attract a wider pool of talent

**Percentage of respondents %**

![Bar Chart](image)

**People are communicating more, across different mediums**

**What changes have you seen overall in terms of the communication within teams?**

- More communication
- Changes in preferred medium
- More effective
- Less communication
- Less effective

**Percentage of respondents %**

![Bar Chart](image)

Data from The Thrive Lab survey, Dec 2021
Relationships & Connection: The Results

People are stressed and struggling to connect

What is the biggest wellbeing challenge for your leaders?

• Staying connected on a human level. Getting the casual recognition bit right
• Team dynamics, managing teams remotely and keeping team engaged
• Regular open dialogue

What is the biggest wellbeing challenge for your teams?

• Not being able to see people face to face and a lack of engagement
• Team building while working remotely
• Missing the fun stuff/human nature of being together - it removes barrier
• Feeling isolated
• Really knowing if your people are ok when they say they are ok
• Being prepared to honestly communicate wellbeing issues
• Limited face to face working, connection and community

People are asking...

“ How best can leaders balance their approach so that the colleague experience is the same regardless of office or remote working?”

“ How can we create more empathy across an organisation?”

“ How do we detect issues in a virtual world?”

Responses to our free text questions, The Thrive Lab survey, Dec 2021
Relationships & Connection: Summary & Expert Opinion

Whilst many organisations are making efforts to communicate more about wellbeing and are finding new and different ways of keeping in touch, it seems that loneliness and isolation are a problem for many. Equally, organisations are missing face to face contact as a way of networking and building relationships. Onboarding new people is harder at the moment, and team collaboration is suffering as a result.

People are social beings. We are built to live in a community and connect regularly with others. Just being around people isn’t enough. But nor does not being in physical proximity to others mean we have to feel isolated or lonely. All sound a bit conflicting? Well, that’s why it helps to turn to the neuroscience behind loneliness. We know it is a subjective experience that has wide ranging impacts on physical and mental health. Organisations need to understand how it is created so they can support people to reduce the likelihood they are affected by it. It is possible to work remotely, manage stress, have a work-life balance, enjoy deep connections to your colleagues and feel a real sense of purpose in your work. But, most organisations aren’t setup to make this likely...and that’s what needs to change for more people to live healthy, happy and productive lives.

Amy Brann - Synaptic Potential

“Loneliness isn’t necessary about being physically alone, it’s about not feeling a social connection with others. A connection that comes from sharing something - an idea, an experience, a belief - with that other person that has meaning to both of you.”
Stress & Burnout: The Stats

Stress and burnout are affecting over half of our respondents.

- 54% of all respondents cited increased levels of stress and burnout as being a challenge to their organisation.
- 56% of respondents thought they had achieved a better work life balance as a positive outcome from changed working practices.

The top 3 positives for people are:
- Less commuting
- More flexible working
- Better work life balance

Our survey showed that increased levels of stress, anxiety and exhaustion are having a negative impact on individuals.
Stress & Burnout: The Results

The pandemic has caused real difficulties for teams

How have your people been negatively impacted by COVID?

- Increased loneliness and isolation
- Increased stress
- Anxiety and fear for the future
- Exhaustion
- Reduction in breaks

Alongside some more positive impacts

How have your people been positively impacted by COVID?

- Less commuting
- Flexible working
- Reduction in work related expenditure
- Increased work life balance
- Decreased stress

There's a lot of room to improve teams’ positivity

What is the overall feeling of positivity within your organisation right now?

Data from The Thrive Lab survey, Dec 2021
Stress & Burnout: The Results

Leaders are trying to balance their own wellbeing, while teams feel overworked and struggle to rest

What is the biggest wellbeing challenge for your leaders?

• Balancing day to day workload and supporting their staff
• Proactively identifying there’s an issue with remote colleagues
• Maintaining our own wellbeing whilst supporting others
• How to manage this sensitive area without appearing to pry or cross boundaries
• Detecting and addressing wellbeing issues before they surface into sickness
• Burnout as they try to keep everything on track with their teams

What is the biggest wellbeing challenge for your teams?

• Not being listened to by management
• Changed working patterns

• Increased workload and responsibility
• Too much to do
• Stress anxiety and mental exhaustion
• Tailored wellbeing that is prioritised
• Maintaining their new found work life balance
• Taking time to rest - everyone is so committed to the business they do not take enough breaks

People are asking…

““How best to help people avoid burnout?”

““How can we better support increased mental health issues and associated absenteeism?”

““Wellbeing means different things to different people, how can I get it right for everyone?”

““How to look after your own wellbeing when dealing with mental health challenges?”

Responses to our free text questions, The Thrive Lab survey, Dec 2021
Stress & Burnout: Summary & Expert Opinion

According to our results, both organisations and individuals are struggling to cope with the challenge of increased levels of stress and burnout. Stress levels remain high, despite the perceived positive changes in working practices, including increased work life balance, less commuting, more flexible working and increased financial savings. Our survey indicates that people are exhausted, anxious and struggling to switch off, with a third of respondents reporting that they are less able to take breaks when they need to.

It seems as though the positive benefits brought by recent changes in working practices are not the panacea many thought they would be. The flip side is a rise in stress and burnout as organisations struggle to adjust to new ways of working and employees struggle to manage the blurred boundaries between home and work. It will be important for organisations to work out how to re-integrate new working practices in a post-Covid world.

The negative impact of burnout has a personal cost to those suffering, a financial cost to organisations and a cost to society, with burnt out employees more than 2.6 times more likely to visit the emergency room (Gallup). Not only that, but burnout fuels its own fire as the impact of stress ripples through others in the team as our brains naturally match and mirror what is going on with our colleagues.

A rise in stress and burnout indicates that individuals might need help in working out how to cope with new ways of working, but it is also an alarm bell for leaders to address systemic issues with working practices, trust and leadership.

Jules Roberts - Director, The Thrive Lab

Employee burnout comes with a hefty price tag. It triggers a downward spiral in organisational and individual performance.

Gallup

Current Wellbeing Support: Key Stats

Wellbeing is definitely on the agenda, but organisations are not measuring its impact appropriately.

53% of all respondents say their organisation is focusing more on wellbeing than before the pandemic.

Top 3 interventions:
- A wellbeing strategy
- Employee Assistance Programmes
- Mental Health First Aid Training

30% of organisations surveyed are not measuring the effectiveness of their wellbeing support.

Leaders are being supported with:
- Guidelines
- Mental health training
- Peer group support
- Team coaching
Current Wellbeing Support: The Results

Wellbeing strategies are commonly used

Many organisations don’t see room to improve

Nearly a third are not measuring effectiveness at all

Most organisations have room to improve effectiveness

How are you measuring the effectiveness of your wellbeing support?

How effective has your wellbeing support been?

Data from The Thrive Lab survey, Dec 2021
Current Wellbeing Support: The Results

Leaders find lack of training a big hurdle, while teams don’t feel like wellbeing is taken seriously

What is the biggest wellbeing challenge for your leaders?

• No clear line management structures for cascading support
• Inconsistency in managers discussing health and wellbeing confidently with staff
• No training and knowing where to start

What is the biggest wellbeing challenge for your teams?

• It is not regarded as a main priority for organisation
• A sense of distrust that the organisation cares
• An aligned cross team company culture that we all believe in
• Wellbeing can feel like a fair weather objective, especially when workload increases
• Feeling valued and supported

People are asking…

“What to you think it would take leaders and managers to become comfortable with the topic and building language around it?”

“How can you ensure that wellbeing is effectively implemented and used?”

“Wellbeing means different things to different people, how can I get it right for everyone?”

Responses to our free text questions, The Thrive Lab survey, Dec 2021
Current Wellbeing Support: Summary & Expert Opinion

Our results indicate that organisations have a greater focus on wellbeing than before the pandemic, and have employed a number of different strategies to approach it. These include wellbeing strategies, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), Mental Health First Aid training, coaching and workshops. Amongst those that have implemented wellbeing interventions, there is a mixed response about how effective it has been and the measurement of impact is most often linked to subjective feedback. A third of respondents to our survey were not measuring effectiveness at all. Leaders have generally been offered guidance in delivering the wellbeing agenda, but over half of respondents felt that leaders were not able to deliver wellbeing support effectively.

The best organisations always knew that supporting the wellbeing of their teams made a difference, and it appears that wellbeing is now on the agenda in many organisations.

Whatever approach your organisation chooses to adopt to support wellbeing, it is important to consider how to measure the impact and effectiveness before you start. Otherwise you risk time and money being wasted and a negative reputation around your wellbeing offer amongst the workplace population.

It is encouraging to see that an overall wellbeing strategy is now in place in many organisations. This is a great starting point to create action and accountability for the wellbeing of your employees. For additional impact think about how to build a system and a culture with wellbeing in mind. Tackling workloads, management practices and inequality all needs to be part of it.

After all, the quality of the workplace is far more important than anything else and the culture of where we work far outstrips the importance of policies and procedures that mandate for wellbeing.

Amy Sinacola - Director, The Thrive Lab

Simply offering a wellness programme - no matter how well intentioned - is no guarantee of improving employee wellbeing.

Gallup
Recommendations

This survey has offered us a snapshot of what is going on for organisations, leaders and individuals with regards to managing wellbeing.

For all the damage that it’s done, it appears that Covid has also brought opportunities to the workplace, fast-forwarding changes in the way we work and the importance of wellbeing at work. The challenge is how we continue to keep wellbeing at the forefront of our organisations to reap the benefits for all.

Here are our top 3 recommendations to help you do just that:

01. Connect

   Create more meaningful relationships and connections
   • Take time to build and strengthen relationships at work
   • Create opportunities to have shared experiences
   • Be open to having vulnerable and empathetic conversations

02. Support

   Manage stress and burnout at different levels
   • Help employees manage wellbeing and build resilience
   • Ensure managers know how to manage for wellbeing
   • Examine working practices and structures

03. Build

   Create a culture of wellbeing
   • Role model healthy working practices from the top
   • Focus on creating a high quality workplace
   • Create a high trust environment and lead with compassion
Contributors

Alison Durkin
Alison is a director of The Thrive Lab. She has a background in HR and change management and uses her strategic planning skills in helping organisations navigate their blind spots when it comes to implementing wellbeing initiatives. She is an accredited coach with CIPD credentials. She has experience in delivering organisational change and coaching others through the challenges this brings.

Amy Brann
Amy is the founder of Synaptic Potential and has written numerous books translating neuroscientific insights into practical applications. Her company provides consultancy to global organisations around people development.

www.synapticpotential.com

Amy Sinacola
Amy is a director of The Thrive Lab and, having worked for over 20 years in the NHS, truly understands what it takes to be able to thrive under pressure. She is a registered nurse, accredited coach and has presented and taught on compassionate leadership, burnout, wellbeing and resilience to healthcare professionals and organisations across the UK.

Jules Roberts
Jules Roberts is a director of The Thrive Lab. She is an experienced and accredited therapist, coach and coach supervisor. Her previous experience as an operational director for a multinational company means that she truly understands how wellbeing at work can have a positive impact for both businesses and the people who work for them. She has set up and delivered coaching programmes for teams and organisations that have made a difference to the overall wellbeing of staff through improving communication and relationships at work.
Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the organisations that responded to our survey, and our marketing team at Example Marketing for helping us put this report together.