SilverCloud®
by Amwell®

Meeting the Challenge:

Workplace Mental Health
in Ireland Today

In my role as CEO of 'Healthy Place To Work' I see first-hand the issues that organisations are dealing with and increasingly, they relate to the mental health of their employees.

We live most of our lives in our minds and as we all know, our minds can play tricks on us. With a new car we get a manual that tells us how to make it work, but human beings tend not to come with an instruction guide. Many of us stumble along with this incredibly powerful supercomputer on our shoulders, with little thought for how it works or how it drives our actions and behaviours, our moods and our performance.

That is why this report is very timely. In it, Sir Cary Cooper says we need to become more strategic about workplace health – token gestures simply won't cut it anymore – and personally I agree. According to the report authors, changes need to start at the board level and clear measurement with good data is essential. It is about better job design, excellent processes, and enforcing organisational values. It is about recognising the link between physical health and mental health. We need to become more proactive and implement preventative measures to support employees in the workplace.

But it is not enough just to read and reflect; we need to respond and take action. While every organisation can reap huge benefits from creating a more caring culture through better retention, attraction, and performance, the more important deliverable is the way in which we can make a significant change in people's lives. We should not miss that opportunity. Enjoy this white paper.

John Ryan,
CEO of Healthy Place To Work

John S Ryan

John Ryan is a speaker, author, entrepreneur, founder and CEO of Healthy Place To Work. He has spent most of his working life consulting with multinational organisations in the areas of trust, health, wellbeing and organisational transformation, leading the Great Place To Work Institute in Ireland for 10 years. Formerly a broadcast journalist and expert trainer, John is a regular media contributor and international speaker on topics including organisational health, resilience, and sustainability. *Make Work Healthy* is the title of his recent book, which he co-authored with Dr. Michael Burchell and which is published by Wiley.

Part 1

Mental health and wellbeing at work:
A strategic priority

There's no doubt that the world of work has been transformed by COVID-19. The initial deluge of remote working has settled into a more flexible hybrid arrangement with many dividing their time between home and the office. That desire for flexibility has extended to work patterns, with employees looking for roles that can adapt to life commitments. And mental health, so long an area that was largely unspoken of within the workplace, is fast becoming a pillar of company culture.

For all the pain that the pandemic caused, the realisation that mental health is an issue we all need to be talking about, is a positive one. The stigma attached to mental health problems in the workplace was already starting to decline, but the shared experience of the pandemic has accelerated that process.

For once, we could see each other struggling – employees, managers, directors – no one was exempt. So, we started to talk more, and care more. With the scale of the problem exposed there was no going back. Even as memories of the pandemic fade, mental health is still a key issue for the government, organisations and people of Ireland.

The state of workplace mental health post-pandemic

So, what's the situation now? In December 2022 we commissioned a survey of over 500 employees in medium or large organisations across Ireland, to assess the state of their mental health and wellbeing, and how supported they felt at work.

In parallel, we conducted 10 in-depth interviews with HR managers of companies with 500+ employees, as well as a number of wellness experts.

Looking at the results it's not all bad news. People are still struggling, but it's encouraging to see that overall mental health has been improving, with 53% of participants claiming that their mental health has got better since society reopened. This is compared to 20% who said they are feeling worse.

Yet, despite this, the prevalence of mental health problems at work is still high. Our survey revealed that over 6 in 10 employees had felt down, depressed, or hopeless for several days or more in the two weeks preceding the research. Nearly half (45%) pointed to feeling unappreciated at work as a reason for struggling, while long working hours (41%) and lack of support from managers and colleagues (37%) are also factors having a negative effect on employees' mental health.

> The Pandemic has accelerated the conversation around mental health. I think that we are getting better in terms of talking about mental health in the workplace, but we still have a long way to go.
>
> **Leisha McGrath,**
> Chartered Work &
> Organisational Psychologist

Employees said they felt

44% stressed **39%** anxious **38%** burnt out
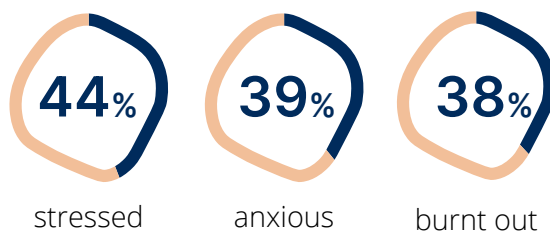
In all, employees said they felt stressed (44%), anxious (39%), burnt out (38%) and overwhelmed (37%), with those under 35 experiencing negative emotions at work much more often than those over 35. One consultant we spoke to put the problem starkly. "This generation of graduates is registering the highest levels of stress and anxiety ever recorded," they commented.

A fresh focus on workplace wellbeing in Ireland

But, while many employers express a desire to tackle the issue of workplace mental health, there is more to be done. A workplace survey released last year by Mental Health Ireland found that just 39% of employees felt their workplace had strong mental health policies in place.[1] A third of those surveyed, felt their company did not adhere to their own policies or even put them into practice.

It's a picture that doesn't surprise Sir Cary Cooper, Professor of Organisational Psychology at Alliance Manchester Business School, who has been at the leading edge of research into employee wellbeing for decades.

"Employers were beginning to act before Covid, but it was the low hanging fruit. It was mindfulness at lunch, counselling, wellbeing champions, and massages at your desk," he says. "Don't get me wrong, these are great, they can help an individual solve their problem, but that's not being strategic. Being strategic is stopping the organisation damaging people in the first place so they don't have to rely so much on this support."

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>
> **Sir Cary Cooper,**
> Professor of Organisational Psychology at Alliance Manchester Business School

"Employers don't connect people leaving the business with the fact that they're unhappy. Very few do exit interviews. I've heard senior partners in accounting and law firms saying, 'Oh, we expect turnover.' It's stupid. People will leave if they're not happy; if you like going into work, you're going to produce," Cooper says.

Good mental health policies have a positive impact

The flipside is that an effective wellbeing policy will have a positive impact on recruitment and retention, particularly among younger employees. "They want to see if an employer is going to care for their mental health and they are going to put that in the balance when it comes to choosing one company over another," says Angel Enrique, Senior Health Scientist for leading telehealth company Amwell®. "So, it's very important that organisations care for the wellbeing of their employees. If they don't it will inevitably have an impact on their capacity to attract and retain talent."

Our survey found that:

- **8 in 10 (83%)** employees aged under 35 say they would be more likely to apply for or stay in a job if they were offered mental health and wellbeing initiatives.

- **9 in 10 (88%)** say they believe that employers have a responsibility to protect the mental health of their employees.

- And **almost 8 in 10** feel that their employer is responsible for promoting positive mental health in the workplace.

It's clear that token gestures, or short-term solutions, will not cut it in today's world. And the case for investing in wellbeing is gaining strength. As the World Health Organization reports, depression and anxiety costs $1 trillion a year globally, in lost productivity.[2]

And if you're wondering what that looks like in your organisation the findings from our survey offer some hard truths. 3 in 10 employees have missed more than 2 days of work in the past 6 months due to mental health problems. And, if they do come to work with symptoms of depression and anxiety, 35% are aware that they are not as productive as usual. 4 in 10 say they find it hard to concentrate (38%) and 3 in 10 (28%) report that the quality of their work suffers.

The case for doing more is clear: to invest in the health and capabilities of your staff is to invest in the health and capabilities of your organisation. The challenge is how best to do this.

Building a stronger, more resilient workforce

A study carried out by the Health Promotion Research Centre at the National University of Ireland, Galway in 2021, suggested that even implementing a clinically proven digital mental health solution, such as the SilverCloud® platform, is good… but not enough in isolation. "There is evidence that a combination of approaches may be more effective than applying just one specific theoretical approach. Findings from the reviews of organisational interventions indicate that in order to achieve wider work-related outcomes, individual interventions need to be combined with wider organisational strategies," the report found.[3]

Up to 55% enhancement of company performance from improving employee wellbeing factors

In other words, what's required is a mental health and wellbeing strategy that gets to the heart of what it feels like to work in your organisation. It needs to tackle attitudes, beliefs and norms, none of which are easy to change.

But the rewards for organisations who can achieve this are worth it. When the right interventions and changes are executed well they can make a real difference. A survey by Amwell among UK employers last year, found that 60% of those who had invested in their workers' mental health and wellbeing had since seen a reduction in absenteeism, while 40% saw a direct correlation with their profitability.

The 2022-2023 Global Wellbeing Survey, published recently by professional services firm AON, supported these findings.[4] They reported that improving employee wellbeing factors can enhance company performance by between 11 and 55 percent.

By strategically investing in the mental health and wellbeing of staff, organisations can build a stronger, more effective, sustainable and resilient workplace.

We explore how to do that.

Part 2
7 steps to building a mental health strategy

We know that healthy workplaces are productive ones. Investing in the mental health of employees is a financial and moral necessity. That's why most leading employers are planning and implementing strategic steps to encourage healthier workplaces and to look after the physical health and mental wellbeing of their staff.

We set out some effective, structured and scalable ways to promote employee mental health and wellbeing in the workplace. They can be fostered by companies looking to improve or refresh their mental health strategy. Of course, getting the wellness formula right takes time, and it needs to

be tailored to the unique circumstances of the industry and organisation. But these principles form a solid foundation on which your policy can be built.

1. Make it a board-level priority

In any organisation the most important issues are the responsibility of the board. They alone have the authority to formalise policy, set objectives, provide the necessary resources and then hold executives to account in delivering against them – all the things needed to drive real change.

> Leaders in business have to prioritise the wellbeing of their employees at work if they want to be an attractive proposition. At the end of the day, happy people who are looked after by a business are more productive and committed, reducing turnover and supporting business continuity and growth.

Eoin Joy,
Chief Property Officer &
Head of ESG, Iconic Offices

If internal forces aren't initiating that change then board members will find that external forces are coming into play. In the private sector the risks and opportunities presented by mental health are driving investors to demand that boards include mental health and wellbeing under their ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) responsibilities.

"Within Iconic we drive ESG initiatives through our ESG team," explains Eoin Joy, Chief Property Officer & Head of ESG, Iconic Offices. "We have a focused strategy for wellbeing at work, which supports our employees and members. And we are committed to adapting the workspaces to look after this." To this end, Iconic offices are developed to WELL certification standards where possible, meaning that they place employee wellbeing at the heart of their design.[5]

While currently, only the largest companies in Ireland are required by law to report publicly on ESG, that's changing. By 2026, even SMEs listed on an EU stock market will be required to report annually on ESG, under the obligations of the European Sustainability Reporting Standards.

Amy Browne, stewardship lead at CCLA Investment Management, views this reporting and accountability as a critical part of driving sustained improvement. Last year, CCLA launched a global mental health benchmarking report, to evaluate the world's largest listed companies on workplace mental health management and disclosure.[6]

"Getting the measure of employee mental health isn't an easy task, but it's essential. Our goal is to drive the collective, systemic advances in the way companies approach the wellbeing of their most precious assets: their people." Browne told Responsible Investor.[7]

Sir Cary Cooper, Professor of Organisational Psychology at Alliance Manchester Business School, agrees. "If every single business reported job satisfaction, labour turnover rates, stress-related sickness and presenteeism figures, then investors would say, 'On an ESG basis, this company has turnover rates of 80% and the sector average is 20%, so I wouldn't touch them with a barge pole.'"

2. Open communication from the board level down

While stigma around mental health issues is declining it has not gone away.[8] Our survey found that 3 in 10 (29%) people would not feel comfortable talking to their employer about their mental health. That number rises significantly among employees over 35.

3 in 10 would not feel comfortable talking to their employer about their mental health

"There's real need for open communication about mental health at all levels of an organisation, but particularly at the top," says SilverCloud® by Amwell® Digital Health Scientist, Angel Enrique. "That means asking about it, and talking about it. Since the pandemic, people have become more comfortable talking about how they are feeling, and we need to capitalise on that."

There are signs that this is happening across many areas of public life. Former Prime Minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern was praised for her honesty and courage when she cited burnout as a reason for stepping down. Leaders such as former Virgin Money CEO Jayne-Anne Gadhia and Monzo founder Tom Blomfield have spoken openly about their mental health challenges, while BP CEO Bernard Looney has referred to his experience of growing up with a parent suffering from depression, as he championed mental health in his own organisation.[9,10,11]

This is not an easy ask. While leadership teams are often happy to talk about their organisation's mental health and wellbeing strategy they may be less forthcoming when it comes to opening up about their own challenges. "There is still a reluctance to show yourself as vulnerable at work," says Enrique. "But when people in leadership roles talk openly about mental health it will give employees the confidence to do the same."

Even if leaders aren't comfortable talking about their own wellbeing they can still lead with healthy behaviours. Leaving work on time, taking annual leave and not working when they are sick, all signal to staff that work-life balance matters. Even just putting working hours on an email signature helps to draw a line under the working day.

Line managers have a vital role to play here too. For all the importance of organisation-wide culture and policies, our experience of work is largely shaped by our interactions with our immediate team – above all, with our line manager. A recent study by The Workforce Institute at UKG, found that for almost 70% of people, their manager has as much of an impact on their mental health as their partner does.[12]

The challenge is that managers tend to be promoted based on their ability to do a certain job. In many cases they simply don't have the people skills needed to get the best from their teams.

Sir Cary Cooper puts in bluntly: "We have about 40% of line managers who naturally have the emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills to do their job. There's possibly another 40% who don't have these skills but are trainable, and 10 to 20% who are untrainable – they just shouldn't be in a manager role."

> Line managers don't have to be psychologists, but I do think it would be very beneficial for people to have a baseline understanding of the signs and symptoms of mental health challenges, and how people can intervene to support their employees.
>
> **Global Learning Consultant, Ireland**

Enrique agrees that part of the solution lies in the recruitment process. "Employers should really assess if those skills are there, especially when you're hiring for management positions." But an organisation also needs the right resources in place to signpost employees to. "Managers need to be empathetic, but they can't solve every problem. They will feel more confident dealing with mental health issues if they know they can help the employee to access the proper resources."

3. Measure what matters

The first step to solving a problem is figuring out what it is and who it is affecting. Then, you can start to unpick the causes and look for solutions. But without reliable data you won't know whether you are making progress and hitting your targets.

An effective mental health and wellbeing strategy depends on getting your metrics right. This isn't straightforward, given that: a) there are numerous interrelated contributory factors that are hard to control for; b) wellbeing is inherently subjective; and c) people may not always share how they feel.

Cooper says metrics therefore need to be robust, clinically supported and ideally, audited independently. He recommends "a mix of subjective measures – for example, how do you feel about your work environment? Is your line manager supportive? – and hard, objective ones like absenteeism and labour turnover."

Ideally, organisations should be monitoring all the time across both qualitative and quantitative metrics, to benchmark a clear picture of the situation and how it is changing.

As well as measuring what matters, companies should be reporting on what matters, both internally and externally. This can increase transparency and accountability as well as showing their commitment to supporting and developing mental health in the workplace.

Deloitte suggests an annual wellbeing report that includes a statement of the company's mental health commitment standards, initiatives currently in place and priorities for the future, and evidence of the impact of initiatives or support through case studies and other data such as staff survey results, sickness absence statistics and engagement in mental health activities.[13]

4. Prioritise working environment, with a healthy culture

Two key factors that affect people's wellbeing at work are the work they do and the context in which they work.

Our survey identified a range of factors involved here, including working hours and work-life balance, feeling appreciated, and relationships with colleagues. Remote working brings its own issues, with loneliness, isolation and blurred boundaries between home and work all affecting how people feel about their job.

No wonder one of the People Science consultants we interviewed in our survey felt that creating a good working environment is a challenge. They said, "It's a struggle for some organisations to make wellbeing a reality, because it takes a multipronged approach to create the conditions for wellbeing."

Many of these elements of good work are deeply connected to an organisation's culture, which can be a notoriously hard thing to shape. Yet, by strategically focusing on things that are within its locus of control – such as processes, job design and the active enforcement of its values – an employer can begin to nurture a culture that truly supports wellbeing.

Physical environments have a role to play too. In our survey, more than 1 in 3 (36%) said their mental health was being negatively impacted by their working environment. Lianne Kavanagh, Chief Commercial Officer of the Dublin and Cork-based workspace provider Iconic Offices, has seen organisations thinking more about what an office needs to deliver as they address the new hybrid working norm. "Finding the right working space is a pain point for clients right now. Employers know that if they want talent in the office, they want that in-person collaboration, they want their team engaged and feeling valued, it has to be appealing. That windowless basement just isn't going to cut it anymore."

With nearly half of the respondents to our survey reporting feeling undervalued, Angel Enrique points to this as an area to prioritise. "It's such an important part of the culture of the company: how are you recognising the work of your employees? Particularly for younger workers, if I'm invested in my company and I'm doing my best but then I don't see any recognition for the work I'm doing, of course I will lose motivation... and ultimately, I'll move elsewhere."

5. Support the whole person

The issues that impact how an employee feels at work often have nothing to do with their job.

With money so tight for many of us it's hardly a surprise that over half (54%) of those surveyed said their mental health at work was taking a hit because of money worries. Over 3 in 10 (31%) employees cited ill health of a family member as a factor, while a similar number (28%) blamed childcare issues.

These concerns may not feel relevant to you or your business, but they are. Take, for example, those employees who are worried about a family member's mental health. 3 in 10 (31%) say they are less able to focus at work because of it. And a quarter say it affects their productivity. 22% have taken more than 2 days off to care for a family member.

"We used to think of depression and anxiety as individual issues," says Enrique, "but at the family level they are systemic. Within the family ecosystem, if depression or anxiety affects one individual, the rest are going to be affected. So, if employers care for the family of the employees, they are caring for their employees."

> ❝ Loss of days due to illness is a big challenge for employers. If an employer can't achieve their strategic objectives due to absenteeism, it's a big problem. ❞
>
> **Global Learning Consultant, Ireland**

Enrique continues, "The link between physical and mental health has long been established, so wellbeing strategies are most effective if they take an holistic approach. A person may not be aware that the headaches or back pain they are experiencing are a result of stress. If you're not offering solutions that treat both you're not going to get to the bottom of the problem."

In the same way, chronic illness can increase the risk of depression, which in turn makes it harder for a person to manage their physical condition. The likely result is an increased number of sick days being taken.

It's important to note that an employee's mental health is not a fixed thing. There are times in our lives when we feel resilient, and others when we need more support. Our survey highlighted parental leave as a pressure point for employees. 1 in 3 (32%) felt anxious about their return to work, and 1 in 5 (23%) felt unsupported when they returned. A similar number (35%) delayed their return because of how they felt. This is a key moment for employers to step up and really support their workforce at a time of need.

The Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill, currently working its way through the Oireachtas, will give parents and carers more rights when it comes to balancing home and work life. But employers can go further, by providing targeted mental health support at this time of need.

6. Be proactive

When it comes to mental health and wellbeing, prevention is better than cure. Early interventions can stop problems from developing in the first place, or at least reduce the likelihood that they'll get worse. The 2020 report from Deloitte, also showed proactive measures produced a much higher return on investment than those that sought to treat people once symptoms had surfaced.[14]

Employers have an opportunity to invest in the resilience of their staff by helping them to develop stronger coping skills and mentally healthier habits. There are various ways to do this, but digital tools can be particularly useful.

7 in 10
have used employer's digital mental health solution

9 in 10
who used it found it helpful

Within companies that currently offer a digital mental health or wellbeing solution, our survey found that 7 in 10 (72%) employees have made use of it, and 9 in 10 (92%) who used it felt it was beneficial to their general wellbeing and mental health.

Digital mental health solutions offer many benefits in that they are anonymous, and easily and immediately accessible to employees. Crucially, digital CBT as delivered by the SilverCloud platform, is underpinned by nearly two decades of clinical research, which has been cited in over 4,700 publications.

It shows, for example, that 56% of users with a clinical diagnosis of anxiety and depression were free of diagnosis after three months, and that 85% experienced improvement in their symptoms – results that are on par with face-to-face therapy.

"There are many digital mental health solutions available, but not all of them are evidence based," cautions Angel Enrique. "And that's key to really offering the right care and support. Digital mental health interventions like the SilverCloud programmes, which have been validated, follow a theoretical psychological framework so that you are addressing the underlying mechanisms that cause depression and anxiety. That's really important because otherwise you're just putting on Band-Aids. I may feel better in the moment if I do a relaxation exercise, but that's not going to help me change my behaviour and overcome the problem that I'm having."

Employers assessing claims made by providers of mental health and wellbeing solutions should expect to see evidence of the product having been evaluated in a well-designed study, such as a randomised controlled trial (RCT) that has been published in a peer-reviewed journal. Other factors to look for, include the involvement of Subject Matter Experts in the development of the product, and evidence that it is based on an established psychological model.

7. Listen to people

One-size-fits-all measures rarely succeed. Individuals need different levels and methods of support at different times in their working lives.

> The younger generations require a different approach. If we are to get the best from them, we really need to adapt, and flex our style.

Leisha McGrath,
Chartered Work & Organisational Psychologist

For example, younger employees have specific needs. They not only feel they need more support; they expect to get it. And organisations would do well to pay attention. According to LinkedIn, by 2030, the number of Gen Z employees is expected to triple. That means they will make up almost a third (30%) of the workforce.[15]

We should also note that men said they would be less likely to engage with a mental health solution provided by their employer. This was despite reporting high levels of negative emotions at work. The apparent contradiction could be explained by a disconnect between negative feelings and associating this with poor mental health. If you don't think you have a problem then you won't feel you need a solution.

There is a clear need for tailored support, but that doesn't mean organisations can't operate at scale. The best responses segment employees based on rigorous data analysis and fully understand their pain points.

Sometimes, this is something an employee can tell you, but at other times they don't really understand their own problem or how to fix it. While at times it may be obvious that they're struggling, at other times there may just be subtle signs that they are at risk of future problems.

Employees are not expecting you to fix it all for them. Indeed, when it comes to being more proactive about mental health and wellbeing, it is important for the organisation and the individual to take joint responsibility.

But organisations do need to double down on figuring out what their employees need, play their part in reducing stressors, and show flexibility when offering support.

The end result will be that you can help people make the changes that will leave them, and your organisation, healthier and stronger.

About SilverCloud® by Amwell®

The SilverCloud® by Amwell® platform provides online mental health and wellbeing programmes that deliver the market's most successful outcomes. Widely used by private health plans, occupational health organisations, Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) and corporates, the programmes are tailored to meet the needs of employees. They cover common problems such as stress, anxiety, depression, sleep, chronic conditions and money worries, as well as supporting new parents and those who are caring for anxious children.

To find out more or book a demonstration contact the Amwell® team today.

Methodology

Our employee survey was conducted online by Opinions in December 2022. All respondents worked in Ireland, in organisations with more than 500 employees, with 58% in companies with more than 1000. Of the 510 people we spoke to the largest sectors were finance, insurance and real estate (n=71); electronics and IT (n= 56); health (n=41); public administration and defence (n=26) and education (n=26). More than half (57%) worked in the office or on-site full time and 8% were fully remote. The remaining 35% were hybrid workers.

3 in 4 (77%) were parents. 1 in 4 (24%) of these had children under the age of 3 and nearly half (45%) had children between the ages of 4 and 10.

65% of respondents identified as female and 35% as male. 59% were under 35.

We also conducted 9 in-depth interviews with HR managers of companies with 500+ employees, and 1 wellness expert, in December 2022 and January 2023.

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