



**MENTAL
WELLBEING
AUDIT**
2023/2024

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FOREWORDS

This year's Mental Health Audit shows that the PR profession still faces significant challenges when it comes to levels of stress and supporting the wellbeing of our colleagues.

The data reveals that the proportion of PR professionals diagnosed with a mental health condition has risen to a staggering one-third. Workload stress continues to be the primary culprit, with 58% of respondents citing it as a key source of workplace stress. While some improvements have been made, this figure remains unacceptably high.

Action is needed but we must recognise that creating open and positive workplace cultures is not a quick fix. It requires a long-term investment and a commitment to a culture shift that nurtures an inclusive environment where everyone feels supported and valued. The shift towards flexible working has been a step in the right direction, with many professionals reporting improved wellbeing as a result. However, we must continue to explore ways to optimise both home and office environments to promote mental wellbeing.

As we look to the future, we must ask ourselves: Must working in PR be synonymous with a high mental health burden? Is this sustainable for our industry in the long run? We cannot hope to address the stigma surrounding mental health if we do not openly discuss the expectations and pressures faced by PR professionals.

While this report highlights some positive changes, it also underscores the scale of the challenge that lies ahead. I urge leaders in our profession to take the time to reflect on these findings and share them with your colleagues. The power to improve the mental wellbeing of our colleagues rests with all of us and time for action is now.



Alastair McCapra

CEO, CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS (CIPR)

If you're in an average PR workplace, nine in ten of the people around you have experienced poor mental health during the last year. That's higher than in other types of business. Things need to change.

We should not accept that stress has a right to be part and parcel of the culture of PR. The industry has undergone considerable change in the past five years, and more is on the way. In every organisation, we create cultures around our priorities. Hybrid working is here to stay, so now is the time to understand the implications of changing workflows and flows of communication. A constantly buzzing feed of colleague updates can make it difficult to concentrate. An always-on culture, or one which prioritises the urgent over the important will not be sustainable in the long term.

Individual leaders may need to be louder on this topic. Nearly four in five people say that their workplace is working to reduce mental ill-health – a sharp rise on previous years, but only 55% of respondents think that the matter is taken seriously. Lip service won't fix this issue.

It's promising to see signs that the stigma associated with poor mental health is diminishing – this would explain an increase in diagnoses but comparable figures for actual mental ill-health.

But that won't be enough if people don't feel that they have agency. There's a vicious circle in which high workloads lead to mental ill-health, but workers feel that they can't take the time they need to recover because of their high workloads.

This is not an argument for our industry to produce less. Rather, it is a challenge to all our industry's leaders to find ways in which to trust our people: set clear expectations and then empower people to be able to affect and effect change. That will set us towards a path of greater wellbeing, with the resulting benefits to our businesses and our people that we all want.



James Hewes
CEO, PRCA



Firstly, I extend my gratitude to PRCA and CIPR for their continued collaboration, which has enabled us to undertake this vital research once again.

This year, our research reaffirms the benefits of hybrid working arrangements, echoing the sentiments of the previous year. The flexibility afforded by blending home and office environments continues to contribute positively to employee wellbeing, offering advantages such as improved work-life balance and alleviation of commuter stress, and enhanced opportunities for relaxation.

However, this year for the first time, prevalence of diagnosed mental health conditions has increased, and stress levels continue to persist, with familiar factors such as workload and deadlines continuing to influence.

It is imperative that we, as an industry, therefore remain committed to addressing the persistent stressors identified in this research. By fostering environments that prioritise a culture of psychological safety, we can not only support the mental health of our workforce but also cultivate more productive, engaged, and supported teams.

As we embark on the next phase of this project, I am hopeful that our collective efforts will lead to further improvements in employee wellbeing within the sector.



James Endersby

CEO, OPINIUM



INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, mental health has become an important conversation, as governments and businesses continue to introduce new legislation and policies that promote a more open discourse around these sensitive issues. However, as the world continues to evolve, and individual needs shift, it is crucial that businesses recognize the role they play in promoting healthy environments in which mental wellbeing takes precedence.

Our Workplace Mental Wellbeing Audit was created to not only measure the changing and specific needs of employees, allowing better support from organisations, but also to empower companies to take active measures in nurturing an internal culture of mental wellbeing. The following report is in partnership with the PRCA and CIPR, surveying 116 PR professionals through their networks. In doing so, we hope to assess the mental wellbeing of those working within the PR and Communications industry, measuring against previous years and the UK workforce at large.

Following last year, we continue to track the changing environments in which PR professional work, as this can have a significant effect on mental wellbeing and productivity as well as the support needed from employers. Moreover, with the rise in remote and hybrid working options, these figures have never been more important.



This year, the sample size has shrunk slightly when compared to last year (179), and considerably from 2021 (559). Therefore, whilst year-on-year comparisons will be made, it is important to consider the effects of these sample sizes when drawing connections.

The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)

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

Looking at the scores of the scale, the mental wellbeing of an individual can be determined in terms of whether it falls above or below the national average. The scale enables us to quantify mental wellbeing, thus promoting wider understanding of mental wellbeing as a whole. Furthermore, scores can be tracked over time, allowing organisations and society at large to understand factors that impact mental wellbeing.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Recommendations

Mental wellbeing of PR professionals remains consistent year-on-year, alongside an increase in diagnosis of mental health conditions.

Workloads continue to be the biggest cause of stress within the workplace

1. Year on year we have seen similar figures when looking at the mental wellbeing of those working within the PR and communications industry, which trail slightly behind the rest of the UK workforce. While these figures do not differ significantly, the stress points and lack of time taken off to assist mental health, as reported later, are still concerning. Company support and an open dialogue about mental health are critical to increasing wellbeing scores in the years ahead.
2. An increase in the diagnosis of mental health-related problems has also become apparent when compared with previous years. Positively, this suggests that PR professionals are taking a more active approach to their mental well-being and can make informed decisions when it comes to their working needs. However, it is also the responsibility of employers to respond to the changing needs of their workforce and ensure that those who do report a mental health condition have the necessary internal support.

Stress, low mood levels and anxiety continue to be major contributors of poor mental health within the PR industry.

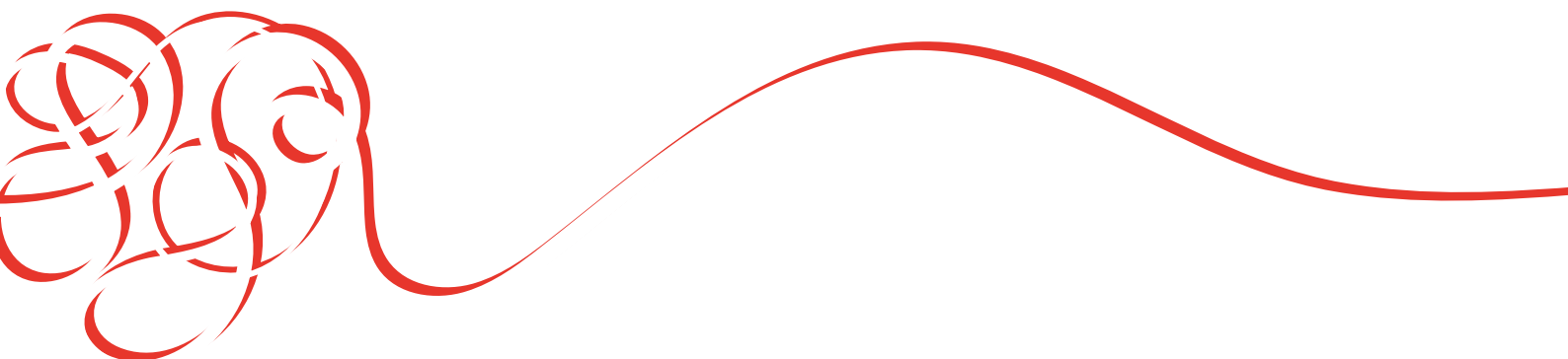
3. Of those who have experienced poor mental health in the last year, most attribute this to stress. This has stayed constant since the audit began in 2019, and this year was followed up closely by low mood levels and general anxiety. This is a huge cause for concern and calls for a closer look into how companies can redistribute tasks and priorities to limit the stress felt by their employees. Team building exercises and the ability to have non-business conversations can also make broaching the topic of mental well-being easier and ultimately help improve low mood levels.

A deep dive into the causes of stress amongst PR professionals' points to workload, deadlines, a busy mail inbox and unclear expectations.

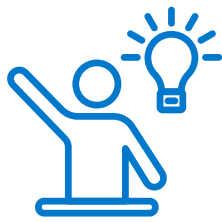
4. Looking at the main causes for stress, we've seen some variation from previous years. Notably, workload remains the leading cause, as well as a key reason why those in the field are hesitant to take leave for mental health. However, for the first time a busy email inbox has emerged as a clear contributing factor. This is likely due to a ripple effect of increasing workloads and hybrid working as employers may be more likely to have their emails accessible through personal devices. Whilst this can be great for productivity, it can also limit the capacity to maintain a healthy work-life balance and should always be considered an option rather than a requirement.

PR professionals continue to report the positives of hybrid working, alongside some considerations.

5. PR professionals emphasise the benefits of hybrid working, including improved work-life balance, reduced commuting stress, and more downtime away from work-related anxiety. However, the developing working approach appears to have several potential downsides, including a lack of drive to go outside and working longer hours. To overcome this, organisations must emphasise the importance of breaks throughout the day to ensure that employees take the appropriate time to pause.



KEY FINDINGS



45.3

average wellbeing score (down slightly from 45.5 last year)



29%

Almost three in ten have found their job stressful, similar to last year (30%)

91%

of those in PR have experienced poor mental health at some point in the past year, consistent with 2022



60%

have told someone at work that they have struggled with their mental wellbeing, up from 51% last year

58%

said an overwhelming workload was a key source of workplace stress, the same as seen in 2022

20%



Three in ten market researchers (29%) say they find their job stressful (scoring 8 or more out of 10 for stress), which has increased from 20% in 2022 and 24% in 2021

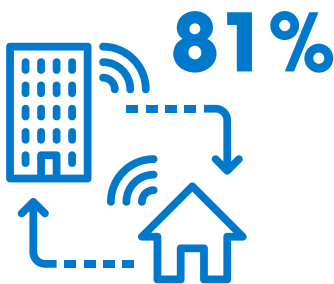
59%

Having too much work to do is the biggest barrier for taking time off to deal with mental health. Three in five of those who experienced poor mental health cited this as a reason for not taking time off. This continues to be the biggest barrier, and now exceeding what was seen in 2022 (50%)



60%

Three in five (60%) say that working from home has improved their mental wellbeing



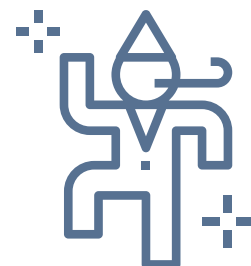
81%

Eight in ten have a better work life balance due to working from home (up from 76% in 2022)

People were more likely to say that their home environment is pleasant



71%
vs.
66%



On the other hand, the office was more likely to be described as lively (43% v. 29%) and roomy (63% v. 58%)

1

The proportion of PR professionals that have been diagnosed with a mental health condition has risen from one in four, to a third.

The mental health of PR professionals has declined marginally this year, with an average score of 45.3 (down from 45.5 in 2022) when measured on the University of Warwick's WEMWBS scale. The sector follows shortly behind the rest of the UK workforce which has a wellbeing score of 46.2.

On average, 91% reported poor mental health in the last 12 months (the same as in 2022). Meanwhile, the proportion of PR professionals that have been diagnosed with a mental health condition has risen from one in four (25%) to a third (33%).

While proper diagnosis of mental health-related issues is critical, companies must also be attentive to their employees' needs. Unfortunately, the persistent levels of poor mental health shown in the PR sector indicate a continuing problem that requires attention.

Year-on-year PR professionals face consistently high levels of poor mental health

When we look at the proportion of PR professionals who have experienced poor mental health in the last twelve months (including levels of stress) the figure does not vary year on year. This year's figure is 91%, the same as in 2022, and consistent from the first audit in 2019.

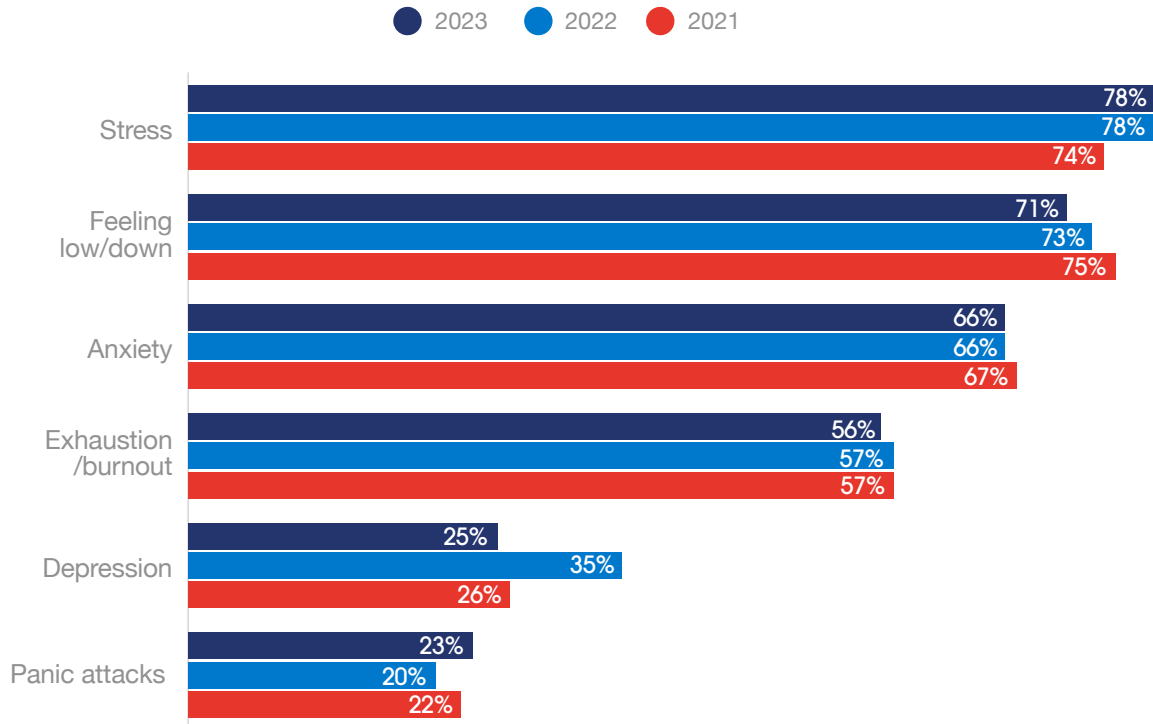
As in past years, PR professionals continue to have a higher risk of poor mental health than the general UK workforce. In the last year, 63% of UK workers report having poor mental health.

When it comes to the specific mental health-related issues that PR professionals have encountered in the last year, stress ranks first (78%), followed by feeling low/down (71%), and experiencing anxiety (66%).

More positively, the number who reported experiencing depression has decreased from 35% in 2022, to just a quarter (25%) in 2023.



Top mental health problems experienced in the past 12 months compared to 2021



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When we look at the other areas in the chart below, we also see that many of the figures are broadly consistent with previous years suggesting that although we have seen progress when it comes to the mental health of those working in the industry, the barriers stopping people from taking time off remain in place.

PR professionals continue to not take time off work for their mental health compared to UK workers in general

Last year we discovered that only a fifth (22%) of PR professionals who experienced poor mental health took the time off work to rest and recover. This year, that figure has dropped significantly to just 8%. This is considerably lower than the average figure for the UK workforce, as a quarter (25%) reveal that they have taken time off for their mental health.

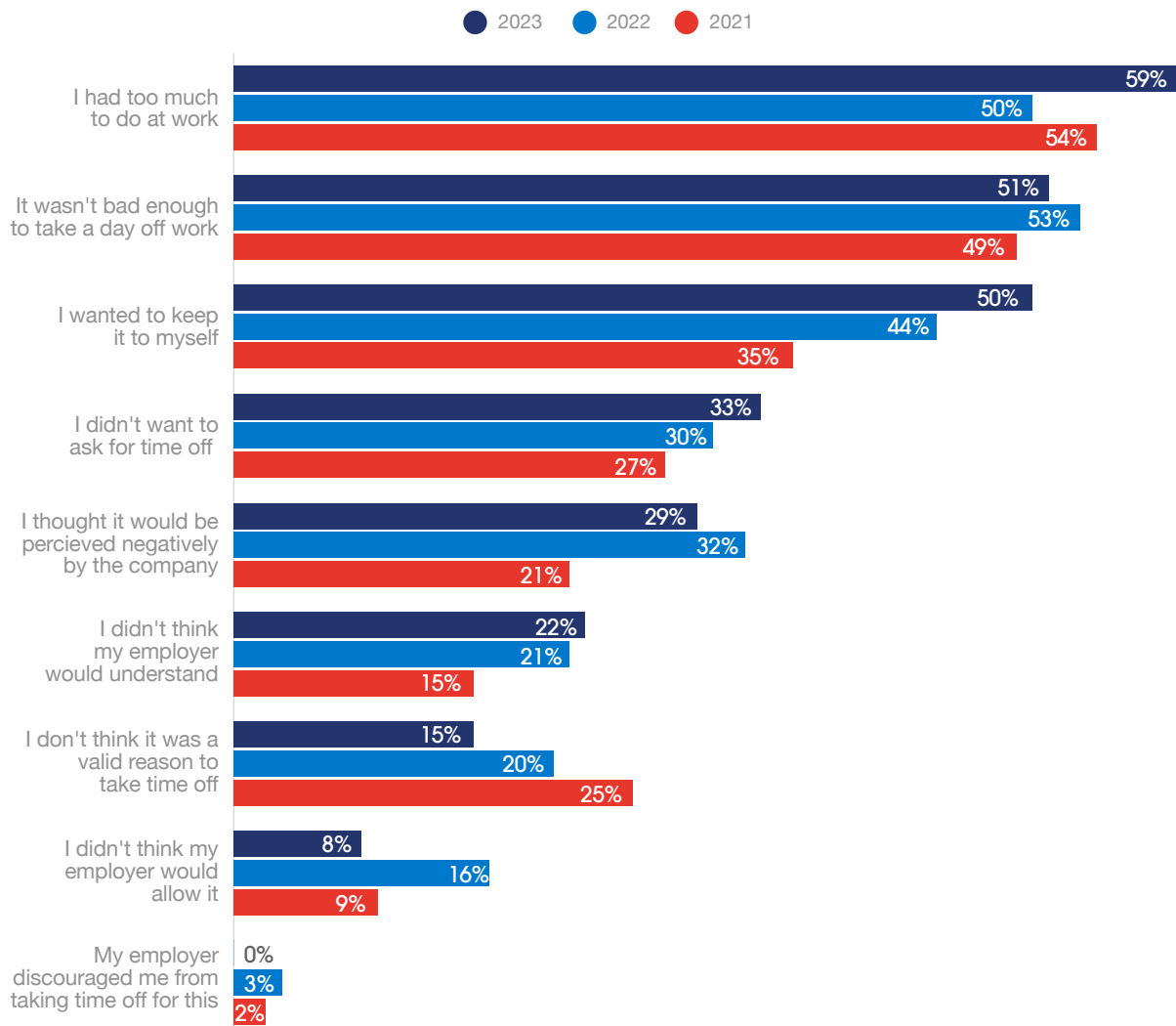
Excluding sole traders, over half (51%) of public relations professionals believed that their conditions were not severe enough to warrant time off. Almost three fifths (59%) prioritised their excessive workload, up from 50% in 2022. Most concerningly, almost three in ten (29%) did not request time off because they believed it would be seen poorly by their employer.

While most people continue to work despite their mental health issues, workload remains a core factor in why persons suffering from mental health issues do not take time from work. As a result, companies must take an active part in urging their employees to choose well-being over workload and to be transparent about the seriousness of their issues.

When we examine other potential reasons, many of the figures are broadly consistent with previous years, indicating that the barriers that prevent people from taking time off remain constant.



Reasons for not wanting to take time off work for mental health problems



Clear communication around the processes and support available for those who take time off need to be established to better support those struggling with their mental wellbeing. Despite some signs of improvement, the industry still has plenty of work to do.

2 Workloads continue to be the biggest cause of stress within the workplace

PR professionals appear to find their jobs just as demanding this year as they did last. Almost three in ten (29%) gave a stress score of 8-10, almost identical with 30% last year. Similarly, too much to do (58%) tends to be the leading source of stress year after year. What has changed, however, is that half of respondents (51%), up from two-fifths (39%) last year, have unclear expectations from their employers.

Half say they have unclear expectations from their employers

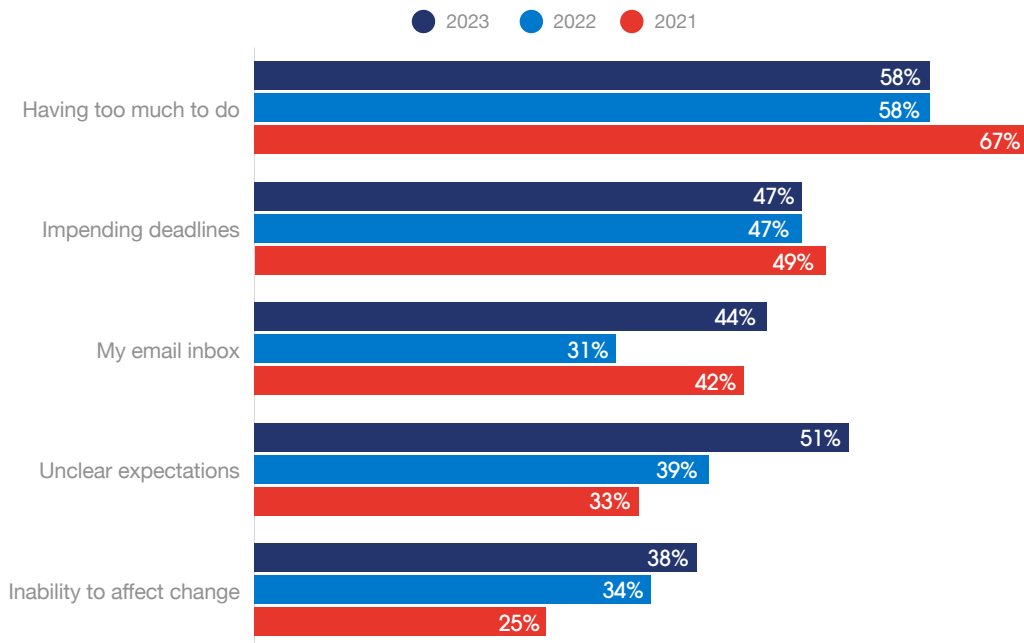
The number of PR professionals who find their jobs stressful has stayed consistent year after year. In fact, three out of ten (29%) continue to rate their stress levels within the range of 8-10 (with 10 being extremely stressful). This figure has remained stable since it first rose from 26% in 2021.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, having too much to do remains the leading cause of stress (58%), with women more likely to report this experience (61%) than men (48%). This was followed by unclear expectations (51%), impending deadlines/ targets (47%), and a busy email inbox (44%).



Interestingly, stress caused by both unclear expectations and an inability to affect change appears to climb each year, as documented by the below graph.

Top 5 causes of stress at work compared to 2021 and 2020



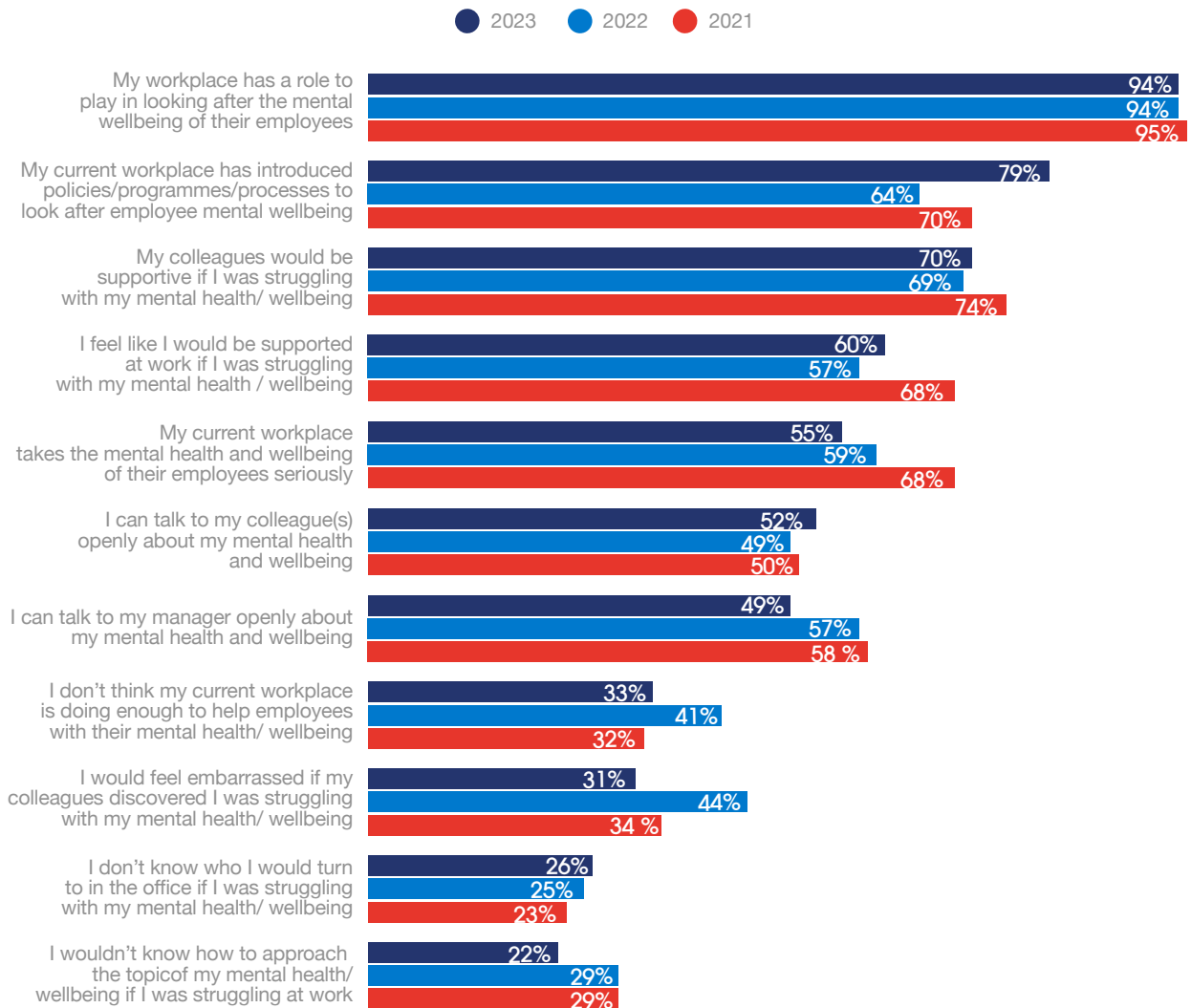
Having too much to do has also remained the top reason why PR professionals are reluctant to take time off for their mental health, rising to three in five (59%) from 2022's figure (50%). This rise in both metrics demonstrates how crucial it is that companies help their employees to manage high workloads or reduce them all together. This could be one of the most effective ways to improve mental wellbeing within the PR industry.

Year on year general attitudes towards mental health remain the same.

Overall, opinions towards mental health are comparable with data from 2022. However, the proportion of PR professionals who believe their organisations are implementing new policies to promote well-being has increased to four-fifths (79%), up from 64% the previous year.



% of those who at least somewhat agree with the following statements



Those who would be embarrassed if their colleagues learned about their mental health struggles have also fallen to 31% (44% in 2022), indicating a favourable shift towards workplace openness. Nonetheless, only half (55%) agree that their workplace takes mental health seriously, with a further 33% stating that they don't think enough is being done to assist employees with their wellbeing, bringing into question the effectiveness of the policies introduced. In summary, we still have far to go in the journey of communicating and ensuring that all workplaces are taking the mental health of colleagues seriously, and making employees feel comfortable to open up about any struggles they may be facing, in a secure environment.

Ensuring that all workplaces are taking the mental health of colleagues seriously. And ensuring key support contacts are known should be a key focus area for PR workplaces.

3

Flexible working is popular with workers and beneficial to their mental health

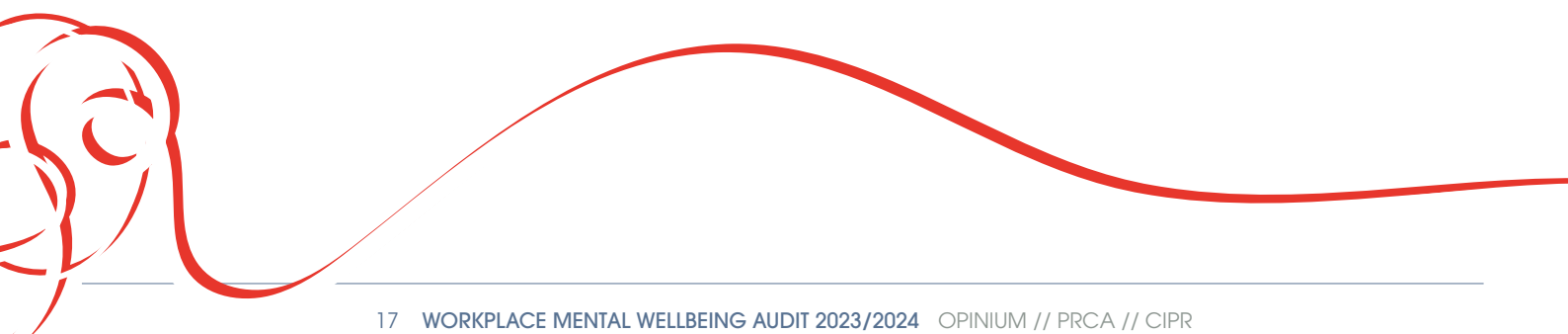
Before the pandemic around 70% of UK PR professionals worked from an office all the time. This is now down to 9%. We are approaching around four years since the start of the pandemic, and it seems like home working is here to stay. Last year, we illuminated how working from home has a sweep of benefits for professionals' mental health and wellbeing. This still stands, workers repeatedly report enjoying the benefits of working from home.

However, when it comes to their actual WEMBWS score, those who work in an office all the time report a higher wellbeing score (49.3) than those who work from home all the time (45.6) or split their time (44.5).

Majority report improved wellbeing in post-pandemic shift

As a basis, almost two thirds (63%) say they split their time between working from home and working remotely, while 28% say they work from home or remotely all the time. Broken down, this indicates that 63% (two-thirds) of respondents split their time between working from the office and remotely, with a higher percentage among women (66%) compared to men (52%). Those aged 25-34 are the most likely to work in this hybrid style at 73%, while less than half (44%) of the 50-64 age group do the same. Given this, unsurprisingly a substantial two thirds (66%) of participants report a shift from always working in the office all the time pre-pandemic to a different pattern post-pandemic.

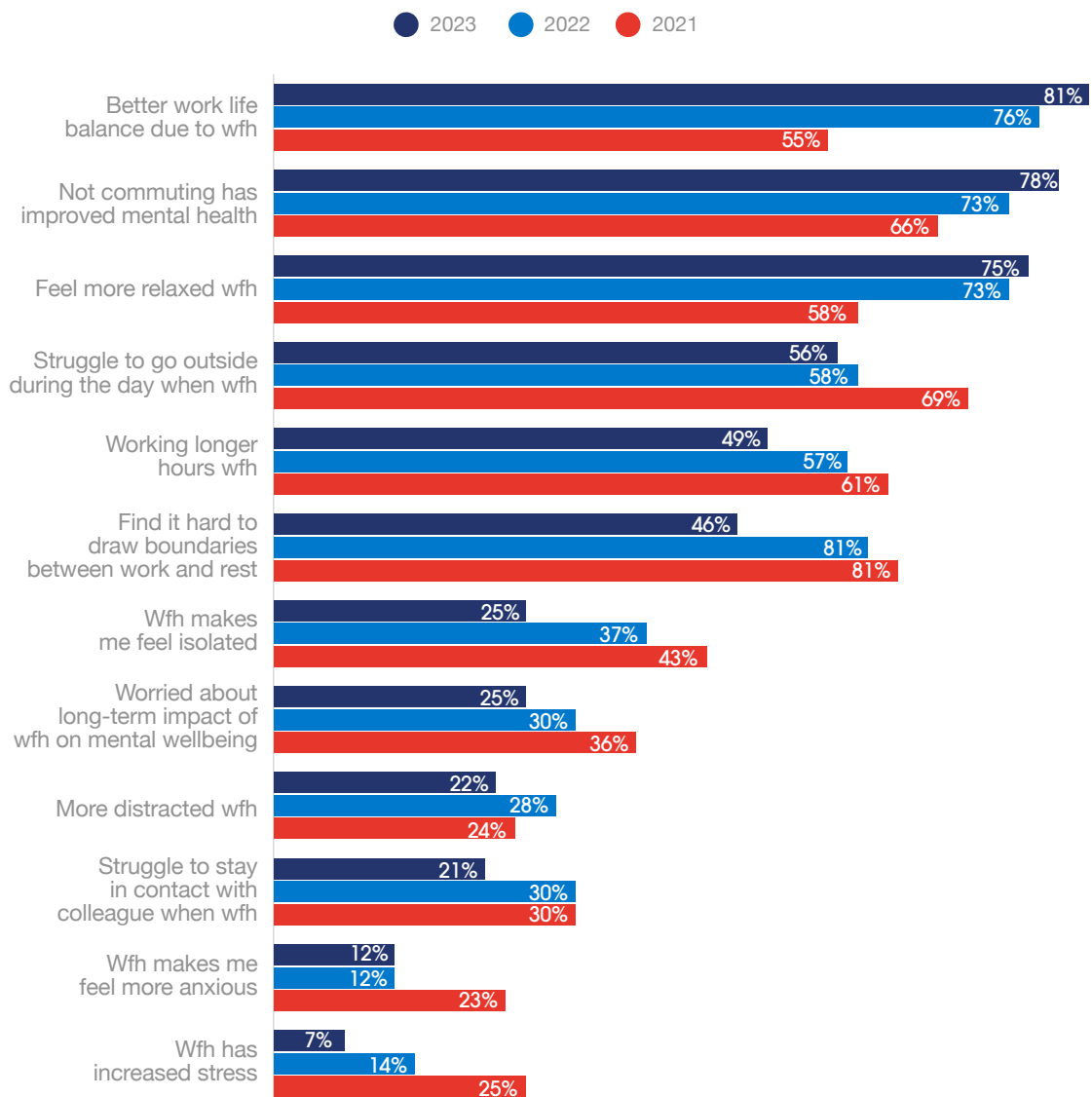
From those who experienced changes in working patterns, three fifths (60%) report an increase in wellbeing, with this being slightly more pronounced in women (61%) compared to men (55%). The age group of 50-64 reports the most significant improvement in wellbeing (69%), closely followed by those with 'considerably above average' mental wellbeing (72%). Senior employees indicate the highest increase in wellbeing (77%), while junior/entry-level employees also report a substantial increase (67%), Parents of children under 11 years old are at 71%. Small business employees (1-9) and large business employees (1000+) both report a 50% rate of increased wellbeing.



Conversely, nearly one-fifth (19%) feel their wellbeing has decreased. The age group of 50-64 and those with 'considerably below average' mental wellbeing each report a 40% rate of decreased wellbeing, which is notably high. Middle-level employees and those in large businesses (250-999) report wellbeing decreases at 29% and 27%, respectively. About one in seven (14%) see no change in wellbeing, with those aged 25-34 and the 'below average' mental wellbeing group at 17% each.



% of those who at least somewhat agree with the following statements



Hybrid Work Model Emerges as Preferred Choice Among Professionals

Professionals largely agree that working from home has positive aspects, with 81% appreciating a better work-life balance and 78% finding the lack of commute good for mental health. A significant 75% feel more relaxed working from home. On the other hand, opinions on work-related challenges are mixed: 56% struggle to allocate time to go outside, and 49% agree they work longer hours, which is the most agreed upon challenge. Feeling more distracted is agreed upon by 22%, and a smaller 21% agree that working from home makes them feel isolated. The least agreed upon statements are that working from home makes participants more stressed (7%) and more anxious (12%), indicating that while work from home brings some challenges, it is mostly seen as beneficial to wellbeing.

In the survey regarding future work preferences, a clear preference emerges for a hybrid model, with 64% of respondents favouring a mix of working from home and the office. Full-time remote work is next in line, with 35% preferring this arrangement. In stark contrast, only 9% express a preference for working from the site or office full-time. The opposition is notably strong against full-time office work, with 81% opposing it. Full-time remote work sees a somewhat balanced view but still with a higher opposition at 49%. The hybrid model has the least opposition at 20%, further highlighting its popularity among the respondents.



4

Home and office environments provide different benefits, but offices could do better in terms of being appealing and inviting working spaces

The physical design of working environments significantly affects employee wellbeing, satisfaction, and productivity. Research shows that factors like colour, nature, and natural lighting play crucial roles. For instance, Kwallek et al. (2007) noted that colours can influence mood and performance, with blue and green enhancing focus and efficiency. Natural elements and lighting are linked to reduced stress and higher job satisfaction.

Home environments offer flexibility and comfort but may lack the structured support and social interaction of office settings. Offices designed with ergonomic furniture, natural light, and green spaces can boost mental health and productivity. However, the appeal of home vs. office environments varies, with some employees preferring the quiet of home and others thriving on office stimulation.

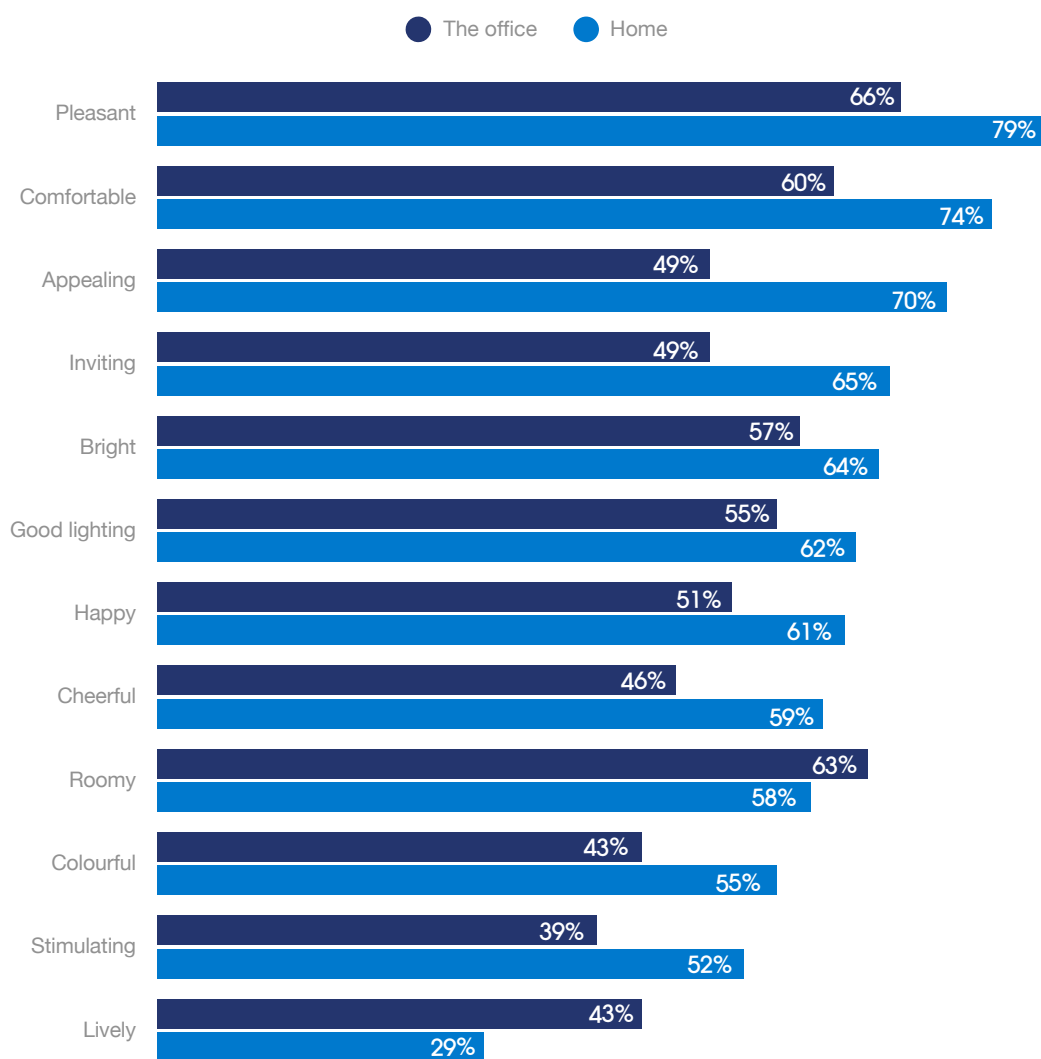
Wellbeing programmes can leverage these insights by incorporating ergonomic design, nature, and optimal lighting both in offices and for remote workers, aiming to enhance mental health and productivity. Tailoring environments to meet the diverse needs of employees is key to addressing these aspects effectively.

Whilst a home working environment is more likely to be considered appealing, the office is more likely to be seen as stimulating

The most notable differences between office and home working environments can be observed in perceptions of appeal, comfort, and pleasantness. A significantly higher proportion of respondents found their home environment more appealing, with 70% giving positive ratings compared to 48% for the office. This trend continues with comfort, where 74% rated their home positively compared to 60% for the office. Pleasantness saw a large disparity too, with 78% of home workers rating their environment positively versus 66% in the office. These figures suggest that workers generally find the home working environment more conducive to positive sentiments, perhaps due to the familiarity and control they have over their personal space.

On the other hand, the least differences are seen in perceptions of space and liveliness. The data shows a closer margin in the ratings for 'Roomy' versus 'Cramped', with 63% of office workers rating their environment positively compared to 58% for home workers. This suggests that the perception of physical space does not differ drastically between the two environments. Similarly, when it comes to 'Lively' versus 'Unlively', the office environment is perceived only slightly more positively than the home environment, with 43% versus 29% giving positive ratings respectively. It appears that the dynamic aspect of the working environment, as indicated by liveliness, does not see as significant a shift between office and home as do the more physical measures of having good lighting (55% v. 62%).

Words associated with working environments



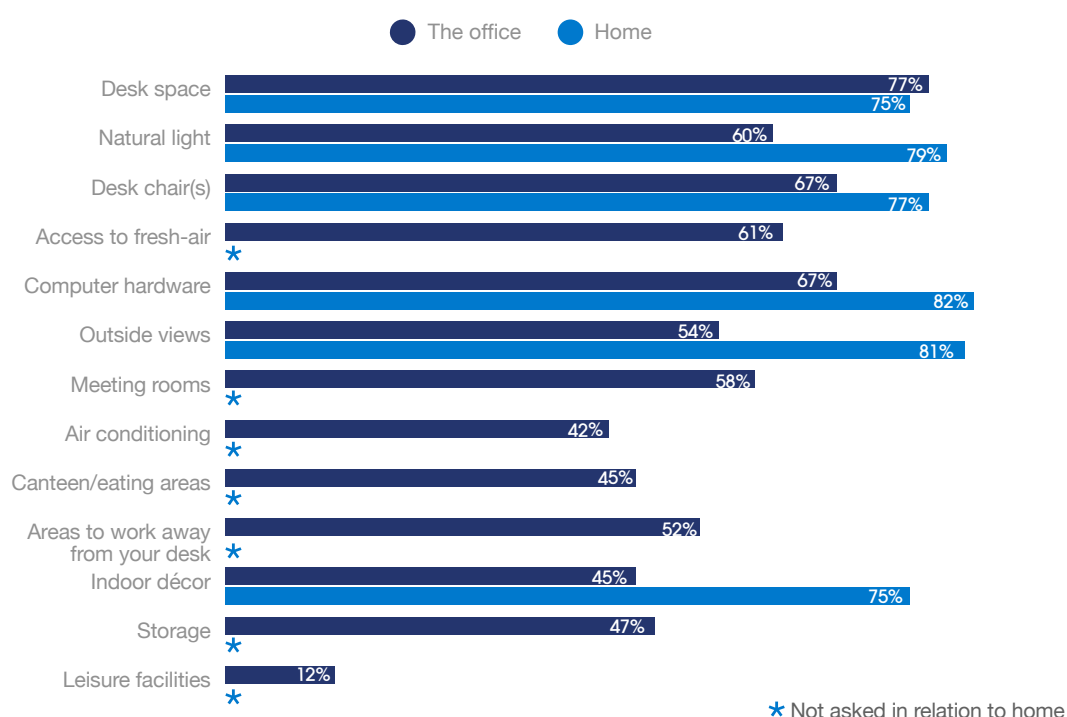
Natural light, indoor decor, and outside views are all better at home than in the office

When examining satisfaction with various aspects of the working environment in the office versus at home, the data reveals some notable differences. The most significant contrast is found in the satisfaction with leisure facilities. Only 12% of office workers report being satisfied with leisure facilities like gyms and pool tables, compared to a substantial 41% who are dissatisfied. In contrast, aspects such as desk space and access to fresh air show high satisfaction levels in the office, with 77% and 61% of respondents expressing satisfaction, respectively.

In the home environment, individuals report a high degree of satisfaction with their indoor décor and natural light, with 75% and 79% respectively indicating they are satisfied. This satisfaction is markedly higher compared to office satisfaction rates for the same categories, which stand at 45% and 61%. This suggests that individuals feel more pleased with the personalization and natural aspects of their home working environments.

Conversely, the least differences in satisfaction between home and office environments are seen in computer hardware and desk chairs. Satisfaction levels for computer hardware are high in both settings, with 67% satisfaction in the office and a higher 82% at home. For desk chairs, the office environment has a 77% satisfaction rate, which is again higher to the 67% satisfaction rate at home. These findings indicate that the quality and comfort of the fundamental tools for work—like chairs and computer equipment—are maintained at quite different levels in the home and office. This may be due to the personal choice of furniture inherent in working from home.

% of those at least somewhat satisfied with various office/wfh features



CONCLUSION

In 2023, we continue to witness higher-than-average rates of poor mental health and stress among PR professionals. We also see workload as a major factor contributing to these issues and preventing those effected from taking the necessary leave.

The nature of the PR industry works alongside tight deadlines, long hours, and demanding workloads; however, it is the responsibility of employers to ensure that staff are supported and empowered to prioritise their mental wellbeing. It is also crucial that an open dialogue around mental health is promoted within the workplace, especially considering the rise in those currently diagnosed with a mental health related condition.

What continues to be clear is that those within the industry champion a hybrid approach to working, noting benefits such as an improved work-life balance, and reduced stress from commutes and an overall more relaxed working environment. However, as more businesses turn to this model of working it is crucial that their approach to mental wellbeing is tailored to meet the unique needs of those working from home. This includes limiting use of emails outside of working hours and encouraging necessary breaks throughout the day.

Moving forward, we must consider the role of physical design in employees' working environments, whether at home or at the office, in supporting wellbeing and happiness.



AUTHOR



Jordan McLaren

Jordan is an advocate for mental wellbeing and inclusion in the workplace and has an academic background in Sociology. Passionate about understanding diverse experiences and the impact of low mental wellbeing on professionals, Jordan works within Opinium's thought leadership practice area conducting research across a range of sectors and collaborating on employee research, particularly in the healthcare charity space.

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What people think,
feel and do

About Opinium

OPINIUM is an award winning strategic insight agency built on the belief that in a world of uncertainty and complexity, success depends on the ability to stay on pulse of what people think, feel and do. Creative and inquisitive, we are passionate about empowering our clients to make the decisions that matter. We work with organisations to define and overcome strategic challenges – helping them to get to grips with the world in which their brands operate. We use the right approach and methodology to deliver robust insights, strategic counsel and targeted recommendations that generate change and positive outcomes.

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PRCA

About The PRCA

The Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) is the world's largest professional PR body.

We represent more than 35,000 PR professionals in 70 countries worldwide. With offices in London, Singapore, Dubai, and Buenos Aires, we are a global advocate for excellence in public relations.

Our mission is to create a more professional, ethical, and prosperous PR industry. We champion - and enforce - professional standards in the UK and overseas through our Professional Charter and Code of Conduct. The Code compels members to adhere to the highest standards of ethical practice.

We deliver exceptional training, authoritative industry data, and global networking and development opportunities. We also manage the International Communications Consultancy Organisation (ICCO), the umbrella body for 41 PR associations and 3,000 agencies across the world, and LG Comms – the UK's national body for authorities raising standards of local government communication.

www.prca.org.uk

CIPR

About the Chartered Institute of Public Relations

Founded in 1948, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) is the world's only Royal Chartered professional body for public relations practitioners with over 10,000 members.

The CIPR advances professionalism in public relations by making its members accountable to their employers and the public through a code of conduct and searchable public register, setting standards through training, qualifications, awards and the production of best practice and skills guidance, facilitating Continuing Professional Development (CPD), and awarding Chartered Public Relations Practitioner status (Chart.PR).

www.cipr.co.uk