



Global healthcare

Creating a workplace that's fit for the future

Mind health at work

Executive summary

When it comes to fostering positive mind health in the workplace, there’s no blueprint for success. Why? Because it’s too subjective. What constitutes a mentally ‘fit’ work environment will vary greatly from company to company, employee to employee. Easier to determine are the ways in which employers can go beyond business as usual to create a culture that helps their employees bring their best selves to work. A culture that’s fit for the future. That’s where we come in.

We’ve narrowed the lens and magnified the focus on what needs to change to see better mind health outcomes in the workplace. And it comes down to creating an environment that’s fit for purpose – arguably a larger purpose than ever before. A place that challenges stigma; fosters autonomy; facilitates flexibility; and champions inclusivity.

Based on a poll of more than 7,000 corporate employees from 16 countries and territories around the world, this report proves just how essential it is to make mind health a priority in the workplace and how, when that’s achieved, the biggest wins can be made for employers and employees alike.

Please note the findings in this report are drawn from the AXA Mind Health Index. For more information, see the AXA Study of Mind Health and Wellbeing in 2023, available [online](#).

“Mental health is not something that happens to others. It touches us all. Yet it is the most underrated and unrecognised component of health and wellbeing of workers.”

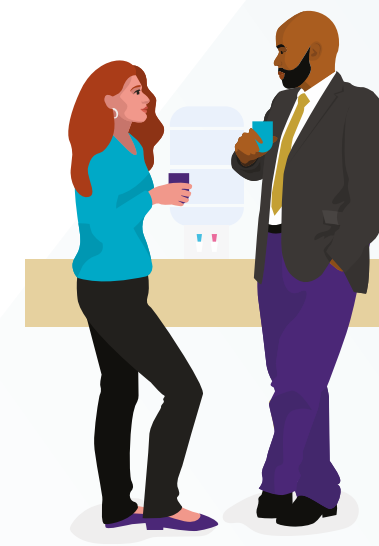
Dr. Leena Johns, Chief Health & Wellness Officer, MAXIS GBN

What do we know?

Our findings make a clear statement: good mind health is strongly correlated with increased productivity in the workplace. But they also reflect the positive effects of:



A safe and welcoming work environment, where everyone is included.



Establishing a positive narrative around mental health to help eliminate stigma in the workplace.



Access to mental health support at work.



A healthy work-life balance – hello flexible working.

We found that when employees are supported in these areas, they’re more than twice as likely to flourish – the top rank in our AXA Mind Health Index – as well as more likely to be in-flow, engaged and productive.

Creating an inclusive environment

What does it mean to have an inclusive and diverse environment? In its most basic sense, it's about creating a place where everyone has equal access to opportunities and resources, and where they feel safe to be themselves. Yet when you dig a bit deeper, like we did, the reality is far more nuanced.

We're all hardwired to seek our place and our work environment is no exception. In fact, it's one of the places that we look for it most. Having a clear sense of belonging is not only important for our mental wellbeing, but it's also closely connected with our ability to thrive. If we feel respected, connected to our work community and valued for who we are, we're more likely to flourish and less likely to leave our job.

For example, our findings show that almost nine out of ten employees with a sense of belonging say they can be relied on to do their best at work. This is compared to those who don't have a sense of belonging and who are more than twice as likely to quit during the next 12 months.

Often though, it's workplace culture that determines feelings of acceptance and inclusion. So if employers want to improve their employees' sense of belonging, they'll need to create a safe and healthy environment first. That involves tackling discriminatory behaviour to prevent bullying and harassment, as well as creating a safe

space for individuals who may feel vulnerable speaking up. It also means educating employees on rules and policies so that everyone is on the same page. Just by putting this support and protection in place, **30%** of their workforce are more likely to flourish.

It has to be genuine though. If employers treat inclusion as a company objective or tick box exercise, they may lose the trust of their staff and find that more of them leave. But, if they put protective measures in place and make inclusivity an integral part of their culture, not only will it contribute to positive mind health, it'll also act as a powerful driver of employee retention and productivity. Win-win.

Relied on to do their best at work

87% with a sense of belonging.

61% without a sense of belonging.



Bridging the gap

Self acceptance, optimism and having a sense of purpose are high on the list when it comes to achieving positive mental wellbeing. And that’s the case for all of us. Yet, for women, it’s more challenging to achieve these factors – and reach peak mind health – in comparison to men. The simple explanation for this? Their battle for equality and equity is greater, which means their mental health is typically poorer.

Following our survey, we have a clearer picture of how gender disparity shows up in the workplace. But we also have a better understanding of what’s holding women back from thriving in the same way as their male counterparts who, from our poll alone, are **31%** more likely to be flourishing. For real equality to exist, employers must level the playing field by creating conditions where everyone can succeed.

In the workplace, that starts with pay. According to the International Labour Organisation,* women earn **20%** less than men, globally. Although this is far greater in many places. And while certain characteristics such as education, skill and experience can explain part of this pay gap, a large part is due to gender discrimination. Lara Fleischer

from the Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD)’s WISE Center shared that: ‘On average, men in OECD countries earn **11.6%** more than women, and take home an even higher share of pensions.’ And it’s these lower levels of income and saving that create financial insecurity for women, making them more susceptible to mental health problems such as stress and low self-esteem.

Across all countries and territories in our survey, two in five women said that their abilities had been put in doubt simply because of their gender. This is more than twice as likely in western European countries. And perhaps facing even greater scrutiny are the women in managerial positions, who are more likely to experience gender discrimination (**14%**) than women in non-managerial roles (**8%**).

37% of women whose abilities are never questioned because of their gender, are flourishing.



11% of women whose abilities are often or sometimes questioned because of their gender are flourishing.

But if companies are to close the gender gap and reduce workplace bias, there must be a collective effort. Yes, employers have a significant role to play, but the onus isn’t solely on them. As Lara explains, individuals can have an impact too:

“If you’re in a meeting and think someone’s views aren’t being heard equally, speak up and suggest a different approach. There are gender-sensitive or diversity-friendly ways to run meetings and structure teams. Speaking time can be allocated in advance to everyone rather than allowing the most extrovert person in the room to dominate the meeting.”

Lara Fleischer, Acting Head of Unit, Wellbeing Data Insights and Policy Practice, OECD Center on Wellbeing, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunities (WISE)



*www.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/Employment/barriers-women

Tackling mental health stigma

In many ways, the workplace has come further than other areas of society in supporting mental health and trying to destigmatise it. But for people who have moved overseas, there's still a bit of work to do.

Last year, AXA – Global healthcare set out to understand how stigma affects expats in the workplace, as well as identify the barriers it creates to seeking mental health support.

We explored:



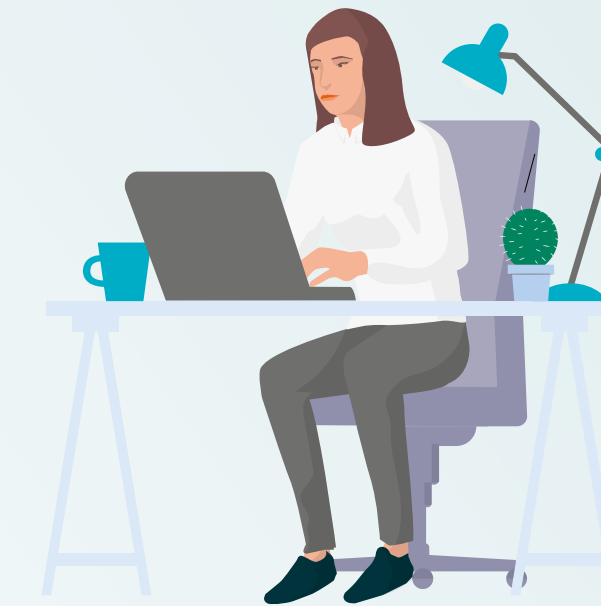
How likely are people to tell their close friends or family members about a mental health issue?



Do those who experience mental health issues seek professional help?



Are they comfortable opening up to their manager or colleagues about it?



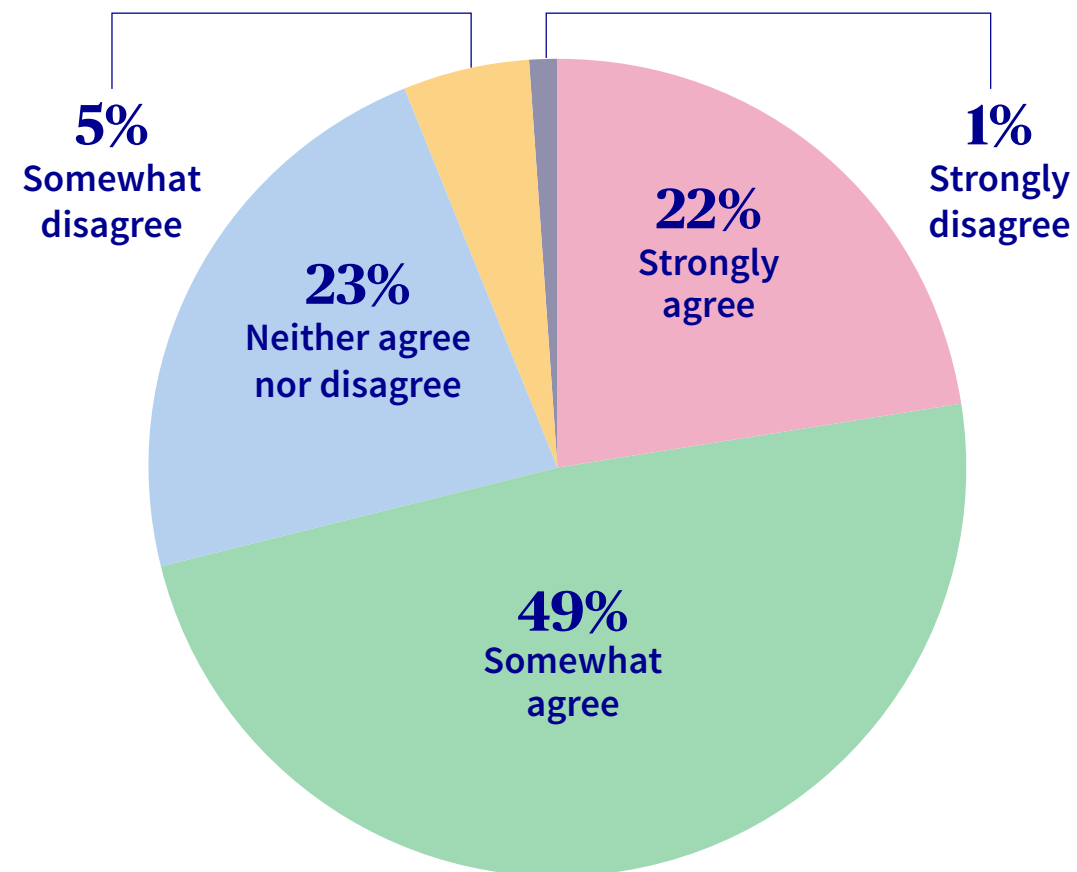
Do people think stigma makes it harder for those experiencing mental health issues to get or keep a job?

Based on some of our findings, we noticed that there may still be a lingering perception among expats that they'll get a negative reaction if they speak out about an issue or openly seek mental health support. In fact, of those that said they've experienced a mental health condition, less than **43%** told their employer.

Tackling mental health stigma cont.

We also found that stigma was closely related to job retention, with **71%** of respondents agreeing, or strongly agreeing, that poor mental health makes it harder to secure or stay in a job.

People experiencing poor mental health find it harder to get or stay in a job due to the stigma surrounding it.



For some expats, the fear of stigma can emerge early on in their new life overseas, often stemming from unfamiliarity with the country’s attitude towards mental health. But one thing is clear. Despite differences in customs and cultural values, the stigma around mental health, and seeking help, exists and remains in every nation – whether that’s in the community, the workplace or on an individual level. So, to really create a culture that’s fit for the future, employers will need to address the problem.

That means:



Organisations need to take responsibility for creating cultures and working environments that promote health and happiness on an equal footing with productivity.

Nicholas Jemetta, Mental Health Campaigner

Getting the balance right

Had it not been for the pandemic, we'll never know how long it would have taken for flexible working to really make its way into the world. But now it's here, it's certainly not going to change. And would we want it to? Agile-working models offer a better work-life balance, autonomy over workload and, in most cases, the option to work when, how and where we're most productive. All positive stuff when it comes to mind health.

It's not surprising then that more and more companies are moving away from an office-first approach, which they're right to do if they want to retain talent, let alone attract it. Our research shows that almost a third of employees will leave their jobs due to stress and poor work-life balance. And while that isn't necessarily down to a lack of flexible working, our findings do show that employees who work additional hours, exclusively at the office, experience higher levels of stress compared to those with a hybrid arrangement. Just working up to two hours extra presented a stark difference, with **17%** of hybrid employees experiencing stress compared to **31%** who are office-based. The takeaway here isn't that flexible working allows employers to exploit an individual's time, but it is another example of how it can help employees cope better with workplace, and workload challenges.

That being said, doing away with unreasonable working hours will have a positive impact for all employees, regardless of their work environment. Employers would see improved productivity and engagement, better mind health and more employees flourishing. From our results, we found that **35%** of individuals with reasonable working hours were flourishing compared to **9%** without.

Flexible working also gives employees greater control over their workload by allowing them to work in a way that suits their individual needs. We found that those who agreed they had sufficient control over their workload were four times more likely to be flourishing than those who didn't. So, allowing employees to work from home – at least some of the time – will go a long way to giving them a more personalised work environment where they can thrive.



Those who had sufficient control over their workload

73% flourishing. **17%** not flourishing.

83% of hybrid workers agreed that they can be relied upon to do their best at work. **4%** disagreed.

Managing mind health

We've used 'employers' as an umbrella term throughout this report, but it's the people on the front line who make the biggest difference: the managers. Well placed to listen to employees' needs, they're also critically important in creating the safe working environment and caring company culture that we mentioned earlier in this report. Managers are also responsible for factors that can significantly affect mental wellbeing and performance, such as policies, workloads and deadlines.

Though to carry out these responsibilities effectively, especially where mental health support is concerned, they need the right tools and training. If managers know about the wellbeing services and benefits available, as well as where they can signpost employees to more specialist help, they can play an even more active role in mitigating and even preventing mental health issues.

But here lies the irony. Very often, line managers are the 'squeezed middle'. Under pressure to deliver on their people management responsibilities alongside their operational priorities, they're statistically more susceptible to stress, anxiety and depression than other employees. As an example, our research found that **31%** of managers experience distressing work hours compared to **22%** of non-managers. Something we already know has a significant effect on mind health in the workplace.

Here's where your HR specialists can ease the load. They're well-equipped to provide managers with broader wellbeing training, as well as to support them in implementing a positive culture.

HR can also collect wellbeing data to inform your company's wellbeing strategies and health focus. This, in turn, can help managers measure the impact of mind health and wellbeing on employee retention, motivation and engagement.

So, the next step is straightforward. Give your managers the right support, and provide them with the tools to support others, and they'll have a positive effect on the workforce as a whole.

31% of managers experience distressing work hours.

22% of non-managers experience distressing work hours.



Let's recap

People will flourish at work if the care is there. If they're heard, included and valued. If their unique needs are taken into account.

Our research shows where employers should focus their efforts and resources if they want to create a culture that's fit for the future. The type of culture that's needed to nurture a sustainable workforce, and organisation, for decades to come. It's now less about using conventional elements such as salary and working conditions to attract and retain talent, and more about making mind health a priority so that talent can flourish.

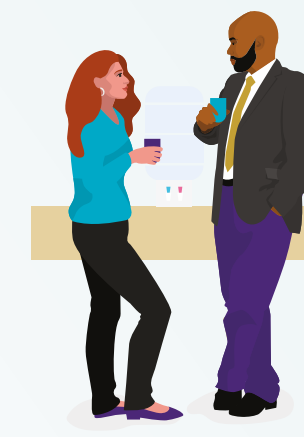
We've summed up our findings with five priorities that'll help employers improve mind health in the workplace.



1 Create an inclusive environment that gives employees a sense of belonging. It'll improve employee wellbeing, retention and productivity.



2 Bridge the gender gap by creating financial security, equal opportunities and an equity-driven mindset across the workforce.



3 Break the cycle of mental health stigma by educating, encouraging and supporting employees to seek help for their mental health. Fewer will leave as a result.



4 Find the balance with a flexible working model. Give employees a better work-life balance, reasonable hours and more control. Everyone will reap the rewards.



5 Take care of managers – they're vital for promoting positive mind health, so provide them with the right tools, training and knowledge. And look after their wellbeing – they're an employee too.



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