



# Continuing the Conversation: Mental Wellbeing in UK Research 2021



## FOREWORD - MRS

Welcome to this report from the third wave of the MRS Wellbeing survey, made possible by Opinium. Thank you for taking the trouble to download and read these findings, because whilst getting wellbeing right should be important to everyone it is especially critical to those who lead or work in a sector for which human talent is the major equity.

**The great news is that the overwhelming response from our participants was that businesses in our sector had done a really good job of handling the pandemic, with client side companies being the best performers.**

I am still challenged not by the increase over the last year of those reporting that they have experienced mental health problems (other reports and the extraordinary stresses of the last year might have led us to expect that) but by the sheer scale of the issue. 87% of the participants from our sectoral survey reported experiencing poor mental health in the last year.

I like to think that by generating focus on the wellbeing issue, we at MRS and our supporters in accredited companies and elsewhere, have had a small part to play in the significant improvements revealed in this survey in provision of assistance for those experiencing mental health problems. Our results show that provision of mental health first aiders and employee assistance programmes has grown significantly. However, with over 50% of companies still appearing not to be making this provision, we cannot yet as a sector be patting ourselves on the back.

**I know smaller companies are pressed for resources, but I can assure you as the CEO of a small company, mental health training first aid is an obvious and simple addition to your normal first aid provision.**

Finally, I was absolutely delighted when the Insights Association in the US decided to follow our lead and work with Opinium on their own wellbeing study. I am really looking forward to comparing the two markets and learning any lessons the US has to offer. We will be sharing that comparison later when the US survey reports.

I am very grateful to Opinium for their consistent support in this matter. All of us as leaders, colleagues, friends and family members can play a real part in making improvements with simple acts of kindness and consideration making a real difference to everyone's lives.

**Jane Frost CBE – CEO, Market Research Society**



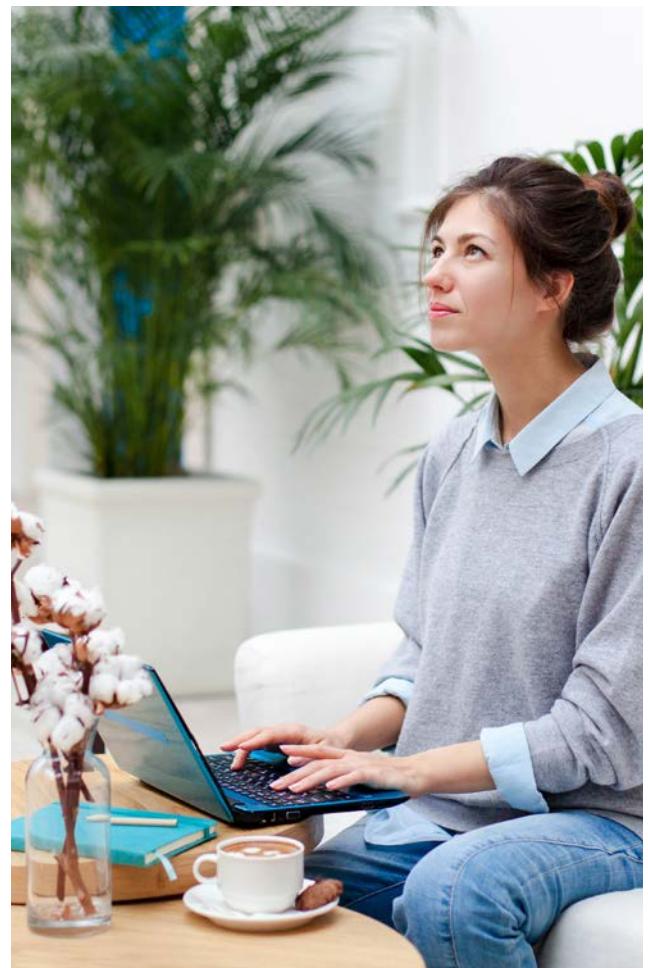
## FOREWORD - OPINIUM

**Burning out: The encouraging improvements we saw this time last year in the workplace mental wellbeing of our research and insight colleagues across the UK, both agency side and in-house, have all but evaporated.**

The initial benefits of working from home now swamped by the seemingly endless uncertainty facing many teams, often under resourced, and the relentless quest to make up for lost time and lost ground, now falling on the shoulders of the colleagues getting the work done. It's no wonder that the number of insight professionals who have experienced exhaustion or burnout has spiked, from 37% in 2020 to 45% in 2021. The rates of feeling low, depressed, and anxious are all trending in the wrong direction too. Though mental health issues are on the rise in our industry, we are just as resistant as last year to taking time off to tend to our mental health, and fewer of us are telling anyone at work about our struggles—though both actions have proven to have positive outcomes.

Now more than ever, leaders in our sector need to imprint the results of our study firmly in their minds and weave them into their recovery strategy. Earlier in the year, I called loudly for us all to put our people at the heart of our recovery as our teams emerge from their #wfh bedrooms and help us build back better. Sadly, it is pretty clear from these results that we all need to do better. The evidence is embarrassingly overwhelming.

**Our research reveals that excessive workloads are a top culprit for stress and the main reason employees don't feel they can take time off to care for their mental health—creating a vicious cycle.**



If employers want to prove that they take the mental health and wellbeing of their employees seriously, managing their team's capacity and workload should be the priority. It is something I myself am currently battling with as Opinium grows, it is hard to keep up with hiring, especially in such a candidate short environment. But we need to tackle workload from all angles, we need to be smarter, and we need to get on top of this urgently. We can all do better.

**We also need to encourage open dialogue and ensure all our colleagues have well publicized access to practical support.**

We need to continue to introduce initiatives but act to address workload and burnout culture. We need to ensure flexibility is incorporated into working practises post-Covid. Further support is also needed for neurodivergent researchers. Employers should do as much as they can to make the working environment as accommodating as possible for employees who are neurodivergent, currently many do not feel adequately supported.

We are so delighted to be partnering with the Market Research Society for the third year in a row to support our industry. This mental wellbeing audit surveyed hundreds of MRS members working in research—spanning agency, in-house teams, suppliers, and freelance. We are extremely proud to be able to share this report with you, which we hope will inspire insights teams across the UK to take urgent steps towards improving mental wellbeing in their organizations.

With all the challenges of the past year, addressing mental wellbeing at work may seem like a mammoth task, but it's a journey. As researchers, we believe that tracking the scope of the problem is the first step to tackling it.

**We invite you to join us in using this research to kick start the conversation in your workplace.**

**James Endersby, FMRS, CEO Opinium**

# INTRODUCTION

Much progress has been made in the area of mental health in the last several years; talking about it openly and honestly has become more commonplace, and governments and businesses have recognized that they have a major role to play in helping people look after their mental wellbeing.

We designed our Workplace Mental Wellbeing Audit to help businesses and other organizations understand the mental health of their employees and in turn take steps to help them. We have once again partnered with the MRS to survey 772 market research and insight professionals through their network, with the aim to understand specifically the mental wellbeing of those working in the market research and insight industry, and the impact of coronavirus has had.

Throughout the report, we also compare to last year's survey of market researchers, to understand changes over time, as well as our normative

database of national UK workers, to understand how the industry fares in comparison to other sectors.



## 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 organizations and society at large to understand factors that impact mental wellbeing.

\*Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS) © NHS Health Scotland, University of Warwick and University of Edinburgh, 2006, all rights reserved.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

### Recommendations

The research provided us with a wealth of data to analyse and deciding which findings to focus on was no easy task but in summary we found 5 important recommendations for senior leaders in market research:

#### 1. Manage workload to improve employee mental wellbeing

More market researchers are struggling with their mental health compared to the general UK workforce. Not only this but market researchers are less likely to take time off for their mental health citing having too much to do at work as one of the top reasons for not taking time off. This is a similar pattern we've seen in 2020, where having too much to do is a cause of poor mental health and a barrier for people to take time off to recover. Workplaces must do more not only to reduce the workloads of their employees but provide adequate support to better manage workloads which will allow for a more productive workforce.

#### 2. Encourage open dialogue and ensure access to practical support

Less market researchers are speaking out about their mental health struggles compared to last year. Those who didn't speak out didn't feel it was necessary or believed they'd get enough help. Many felt if they did speak out, their concerns would be overlooked and there wouldn't be processes in place to help support their mental health. Workplaces must provide practical support such as counselling and training so employees feel safe when discussing their mental health.



### **3. Continue to introduce initiatives but act to address workload and burnout culture**

The number of employers offering initiatives to support employee wellbeing has risen this year, especially in the case of mental health first aiders and employee assistance programs. There remains demand for employers to offer duvet / mental health days, as well as actively monitoring employee mental wellbeing. Though the biggest change employees want to see when it comes to mental health in the workplace is in relation to culture and burnout. The underlying and fundamental issue of unmanageable workloads must be addressed first and foremost, in addition to encouraging an open and honest culture around mental health.

### **4. Ensure flexibility is incorporated into working practises post-Covid**

When it comes to working from home, employers need to allow as much flexibility as possible for their workforce. There are benefits and difficulties to both working from home and working from the office, and employees know what's best for them. Allowing them to manage their own working patterns will make for a healthier and happy workplace.

### **5. Further support is needed for neurodivergent researchers**

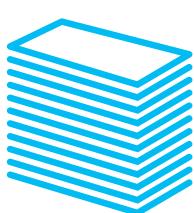
Employers should do as much as possible make the working environment as accommodating as possible for employees who are neurodivergent, currently many do not feel adequately supported.



## KEY FINDINGS

87% of market researchers have experienced poor mental health in the last 12 months compared to 83% in 2020

Just **18%** of market researchers who experienced poor mental health took time off work to rest



Having too much to do at work remains the top cause of stress at work since 2019

**46%** have access to a mental health first aider (up from 34% in 2020) and 41% have access to an employee assistance program (up from 35%)



Nearly all (98%) are working from home all or some of the time

57% found that they feel more relaxed working from home

**43%** of those who are neurodivergent say that they are not supported at all in respect to their condition



A quarter (24%) of Market researchers say they find their job stressful (up from 21% in 2020)



**45%** would like to see their employers introduce duvet/ mental health days

Positively, **76%** believe that their employer has handled the pandemic well, rising to 83% for those working in-house/ client side



## 1. MANAGE WORKLOAD TO IMPROVE EMPLOYEE MENTAL WELLBEING

While wellbeing scores remain unchanged, looking deeper we can see the mental wellbeing of market researchers has worsened compared to last year. Nine in ten (87%) market researchers have experienced poor mental health in the last year compared to 83% in 2020. Market researchers also remain less likely than the general UK workforce to take time off for their mental health (18% vs 32%). The top reasons for not taking time off are consistent with last year; it wasn't bad enough to take a day off work (57%) and having too much to do at work (53%).

For the few who did decide to take time off for their mental health, 50% felt guilty for taking time off work, and 16% were not supported when they returned to work after taking time off for their mental health. Workplaces need to do more in this space, and not only encourage open dialogue about mental health but also better manage workloads to ensure that this isn't negatively impacting employee mental health.

There is also a clear lack of infrastructure set in place within workplaces to help support those who return from taking time off work, clear processes to support those who take time off need to be established to better support those struggling with their mental wellbeing.

### Mental wellbeing scores remain unchanged from 2020

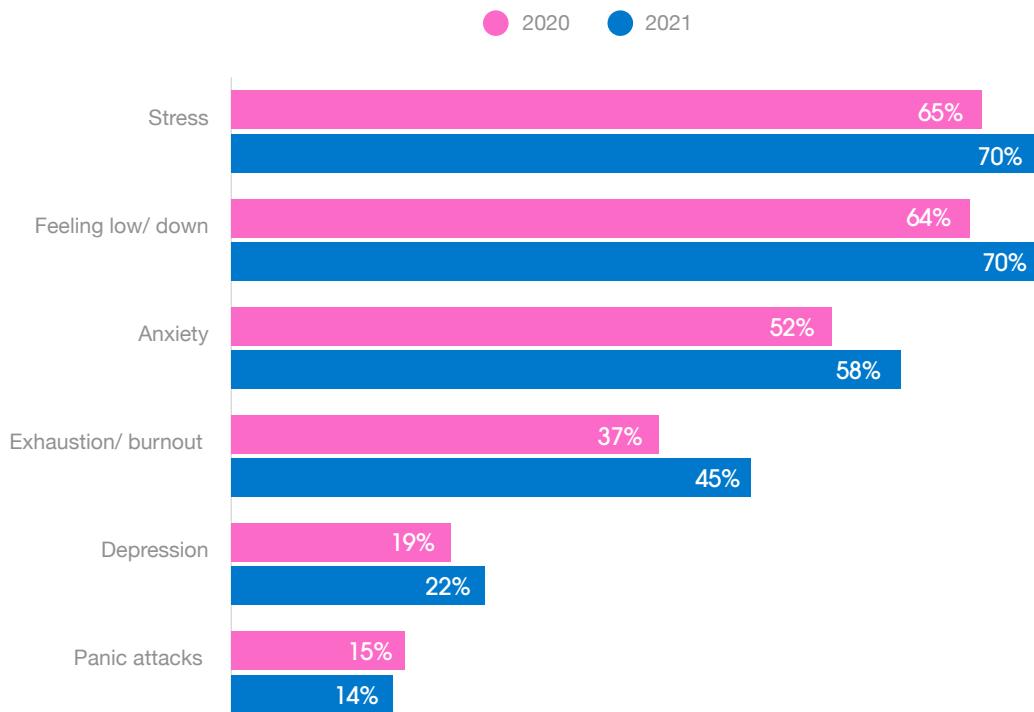
Mental wellbeing scores for those in the market research industry have remained consistent with last years (46.1). They are also slightly less than the UK workforce at large (46.5). While at the surface this is good news, market researchers are more stressed and more have experienced poor mental health in the past 12 months.

### However, more market researchers have experienced poor mental health in the last year compared to in 2020

Despite mental wellbeing scores remaining unchanged from last year, more market researchers are experiencing poor mental health this year. Nine in ten (87%) market researchers have experienced poor mental health in the last year compared to 83% in 2020. Market researchers are also more likely to experience poor mental health than the rest of the UK workforce; 65% of UK workers have experienced this in the past year. Looking at what people have experienced this past year, seven in ten (70%) experienced feeling low/ down, this is higher than the findings from last year (64%) and the rest of the UK workforce (41%).

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**Top mental health problems experienced in the past 12 months compared to 2020 to those without**



**Market researchers are more reluctant to take time off work for their mental wellbeing compared to UK workers at large**

Just 18% of market researchers who experienced poor mental health took time off work to rest. While these figures are in line with findings in 2020 (18% took time off for their mental health), they are still lower than the national average (32%). It's also worth noting that market researchers are also less likely to take time off for their physical health (30%) compared to the rest of the UK workforce (40%). Those in senior positions are also less likely to take time off for their mental health (15%) compared to junior/ entry level researchers (25%).

Encouragingly, three fifths (59%) of those who took time off work told their employer the exact reason, this is slightly lower than 62% last year. A quarter told their employers a different reason (26%, down from 29% last year) and 17% said it was a physical illness instead (up from 15% in 2020).

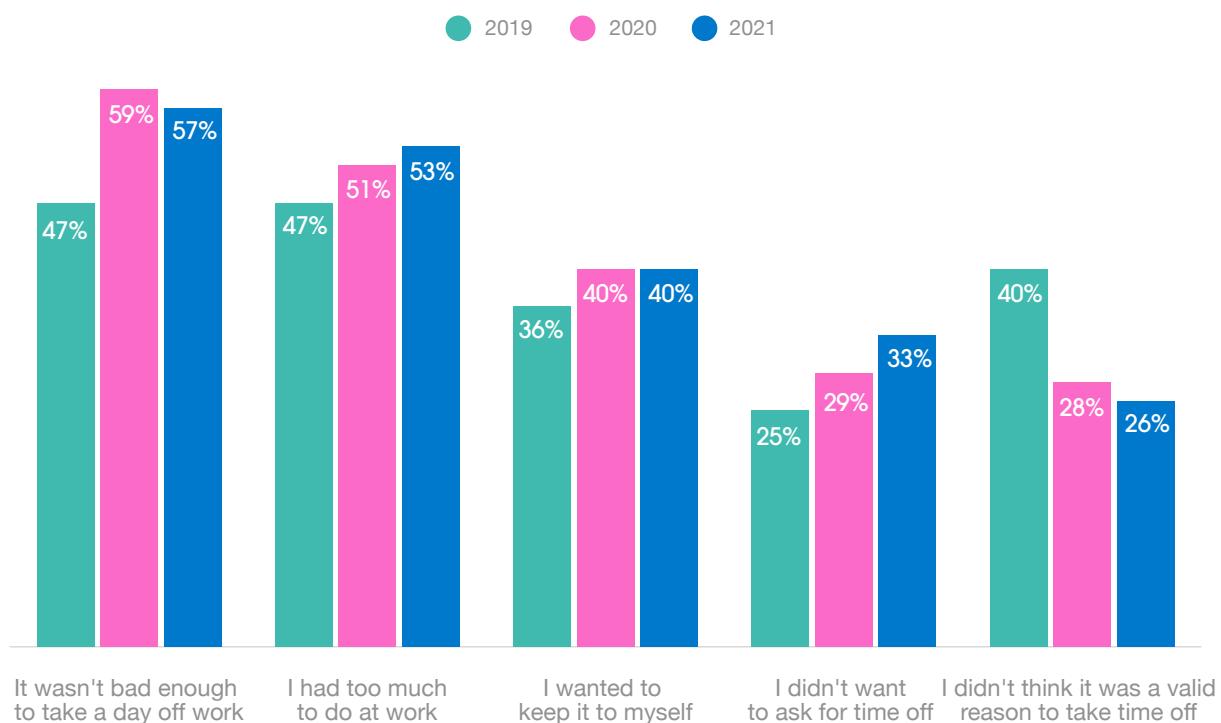
The reluctance to take time off for mental health is alarming considering a third (33%) of those who experienced a mental health problem said it caused a significant negative impact on their work and 69% said it caused a slight negative impact.

When looking at reasons why market researchers are hesitant to take time off for their mental health, believing it wasn't bad enough to take a day off work comes out as the top reason (57%) similar to last year's figure (59%) but higher than the findings in 2019 (47%). Alarmingly, 53% had too much to do at work to take time off for their mental health, up from 51% last year and from 47% in 2019. Two fifths (40%) wanted to keep it to themselves, 33% didn't want to take time off and 26% didn't think it was a valid reason.

While these figures are similar to last year, the top reasons for not taking time off have remained consistent over time and even rising in some cases from 2019. This shows little change in the market research industry to encourage workers to prioritise their mental health.

Not only is there an increase since 2019, but these figures are also comparatively higher than the national workforce this year. Just under two in five (38%) UK workers believed it wasn't bad enough to take a day off work and 18% had too much to do at work to take time off for this. This highlights again there is more work to be done within the industry to reduce the stigma related to mental wellbeing within the workplace.

#### Top 5 reasons why those who experienced a mental health problem didn't take time off work compared to 2020 and 2019



For those who did decide to take time off for their mental health the benefits were clear, three quarters (72%) say their quality of work improved and 63% returned to work feeling much better. Although, half (50%) still felt guilty taking time off work and 25% felt pressure to come back to work early, similar to last year.

This may be driven by a lack of support infrastructure available at workplaces regarding returning to work after taking time off. Just 26% said that there was a clear process in helping them return to work. Following a similar trend, 40% were unsure about what support was in place for them when they returned. And worryingly, 16% said that they were not supported when they returned to work after taking time off for their mental health. This highlights a need for clearer processes to support those who are returning back to work. Not only will this encourage more people to prioritise their mental health, but it'll reassure those who do happen to struggle with their mental health that there is clear support available.



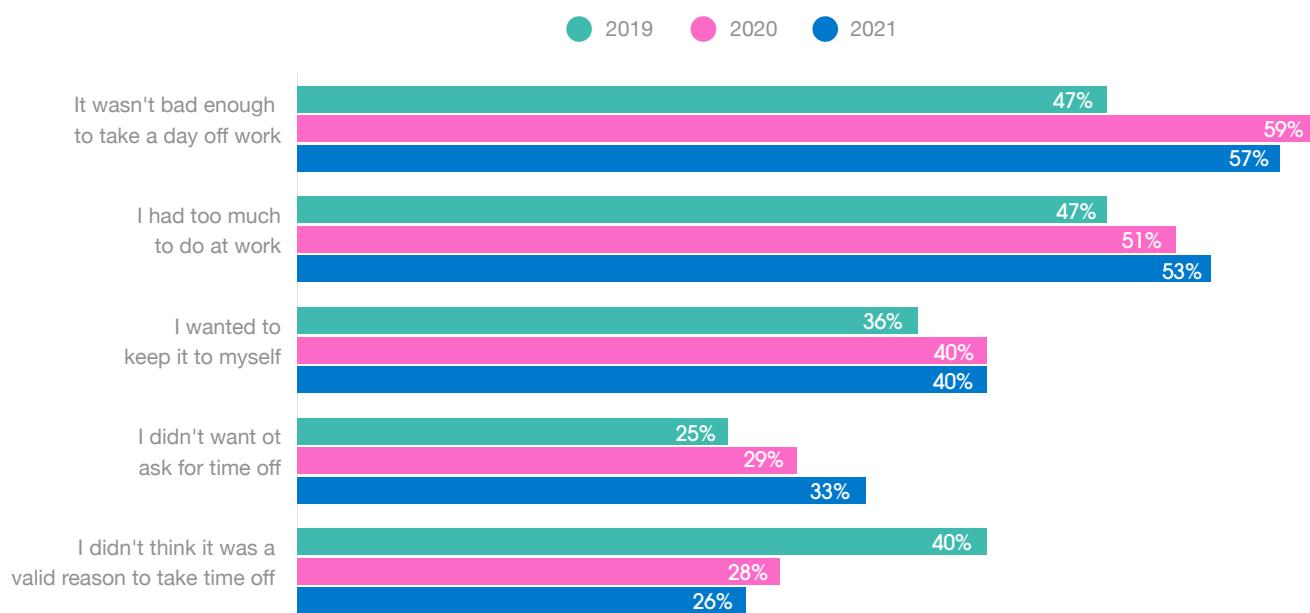
## 2. ENCOURAGE OPEN DIALOGUE AND ENSURE ACCESS TO PRACTICAL SUPPORT

Market researchers find their job more stressful compared to last year. Similar to last year, the top cause of stress is having too much to do (57%) followed by impending deadlines/ targets (51%). However, market researchers are speaking up and are more likely to discuss their experiences of poor mental health compared to UK workers. For those who haven't spoken out about their struggles, the top reason again this year were not feeling it was necessary to tell them (51%), though this is lower than last year (60%), followed by not thinking anyone within their workplace was able to help (31%). The lack of support within workplaces were a deterrent to many opening up, it's vital that the industry has relevant systems of support in place at work, in addition to encouraging open dialogue around mental health.

Market researchers find their job more stressful compared to last year. A quarter (24%) of Market researchers say they find their job stressful (giving it a score of 8-10, 10 being extremely stressful), compared to 21% in 2020. This is also comparatively higher than to the rest of the UK workforce (16%).

Having too much to do came out as the top cause of stress again this year (57%), up from 53% in 2020), followed by impending deadlines/ targets (51%), poor work life balance (41%) and risk involved in projects going wrong (39%). All of these are up from last year as show in the chart below.

Top 5 causes of stress at work compared to 2020 and 2019



Having too much to do is also one of the top reasons why market researchers didn't take time off for their mental health (51%). Helping employees manage their high workloads or reducing them all together would break the cycle of employees feeling overwhelmed to the point it harms their mental health but being unable to take time off work because of their workloads. It's in the best interest of employers to help support employees mental health and ensure manageable workload, doing so will improve the mental health of employees and will ultimately lead to a happier, healthier and more productive workforce.

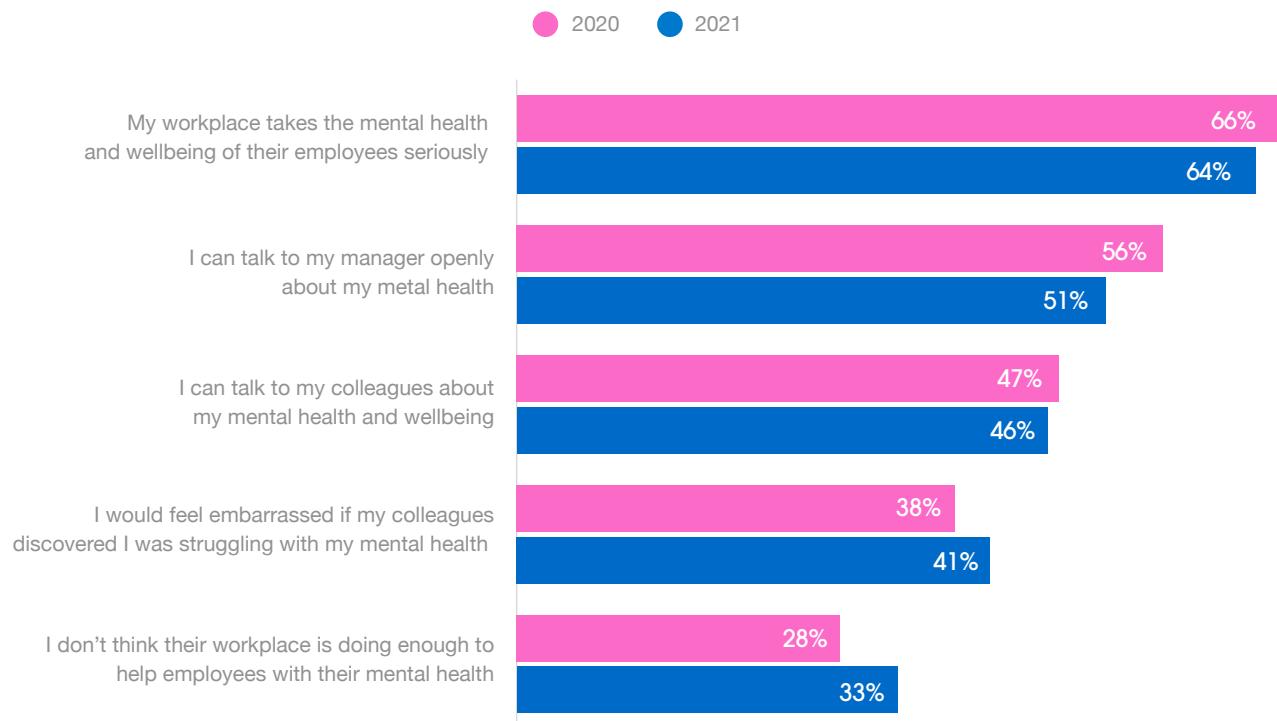
## Attitudes towards mental health in the workplace are similar to last year

A similar proportion of market researchers are likely to feel their workplace takes the mental health and wellbeing of their employees seriously (64%, compared to 66% in 2020). Not only this, but 51% feel they can talk to their manager openly (down from 56% in 2020) and 46% can talk to their colleagues about their mental health and wellbeing (down from 47%).

Despite this, slightly more market researchers would feel embarrassed if their colleagues discovered they were struggling with their mental health (41%, up from 38% in 2020) and a third (33%) don't think their workplace is doing enough to help employees with their mental health, higher than figures last year (28%). Despite the progress made, for some, there is still a sense of embarrassment and taboo when it comes to discussing mental health in the workplace and highlights a gap within the industry to change these perceptions.



## % of non-sole traders who agree with the following



## Half of those experiencing poor mental health spoke out but there is a lack of support

Less people are also speaking up at work about experiencing poor mental health. Half (52%) of those who experienced poor mental health told someone, though this is lower than last year (57%). The most common people to speak to are line managers (57%) and another colleague (51%).

Positively, market researchers are more likely to speak out than UK workers (40%). Looking at the outcomes of those conversations, the majority (73%) said the person they spoke to was supportive and understanding, similar to last year (75%). A quarter (26%) say they asked what they could do to help, while 21% said although they were sympathetic.

For those who didn't speak up, not thinking it was necessary came out on top (51%), though this is down from 60% last year. 31% didn't think they were able to help (down from 33% in 2020) and 22% weren't sure how to talk about it (down from 24%).

Lack of support and infrastructure to help those who struggled with their mental wellbeing came through in some of the open answers as to why they didn't talk to someone at work about his:

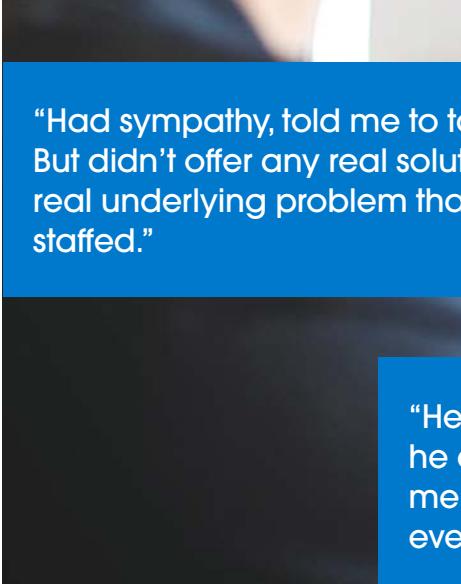


"Don't know what support they would offer, worried it might make my managers feel I cannot handle responsibility."



"They have a mental support in place but they don't do it! I lost my father last year and my mother this year to Covid and I have had no support at all."

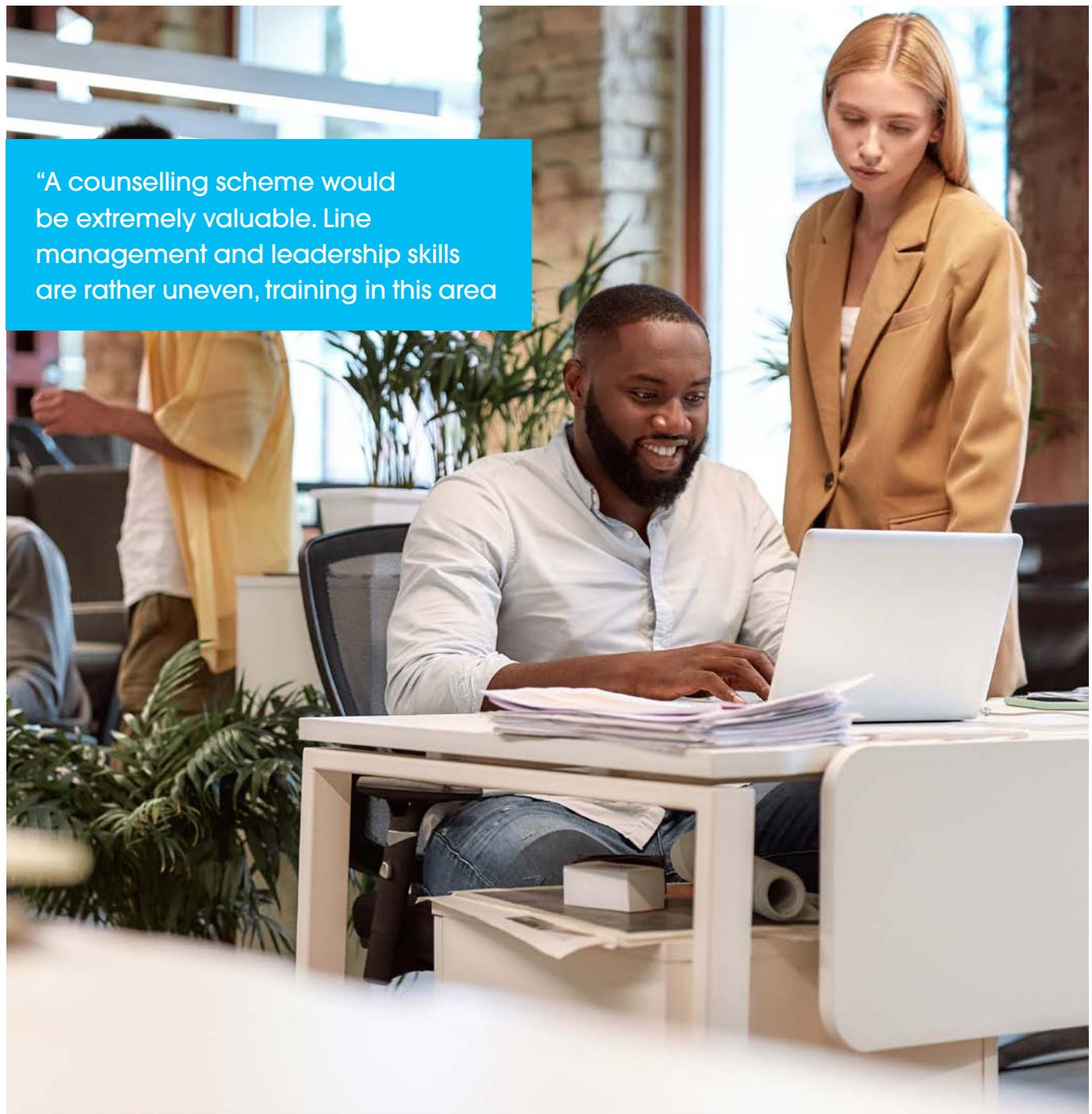
Even those who spoke up at work about their experiences of poor mental health and had positive experiences, echoed the above sentiment around a lack of practical support:



"Had sympathy, told me to take time off. But didn't offer any real solutions to the real underlying problem that we are under staffed."

"He appeared to be supportive and understanding but he didn't take any action to alleviate the situation. He told me that he understood and thought that it's like that for everyone at the moment. So it was pointless me telling him."

Providing a safe space for people to discuss their mental health is only half the battle. Many are reluctant to speak up because of the lack of useful support for improving mental health and failure to decrease the workplace practices that cause poor mental health are overlooked. Many want to see employers better support employee wellbeing in practical ways, such as through counselling, training and increased hiring.



“A counselling scheme would be extremely valuable. Line management and leadership skills are rather uneven, training in this area

## Taking action

While encouraging market researchers to be more open about their mental health is meaningful, it can run the risk of causing greater harm in the future if no action is taking place. Having the relevant support through training and mental wellness schemes within the workplace which will help prevent poor mental health becoming a consistent struggle for staff members. This will also encourage more people to be open about their struggles, knowing that they will be signposted to useful initiatives and supported in practical ways with their mental health.

### 3. CONTINUE TO INTRODUCE INITIATIVES BUT ACT TO ADDRESS WORKLOAD AND BURNOUT CULTURE

The number of employers offering initiatives to support employee wellbeing has risen this year, especially in the case of mental health first aiders and employee assistance programs. And there are some initiatives for which usage is correlated with improved wellbeing. There remains demand for employers to offer duvet / mental health days, as well as actively monitoring employee mental wellbeing. Though the biggest change employees want to see when it comes to mental health in the workplace is in relation to culture and burnout. The underlying and fundamental issue of unmanageable workloads must be addressed first and foremost, as well as encouraging an open and honest culture around mental health.

The past year has seen an increase in flexibility when it comes to working practises, with an increase in the number of researchers offered both remote working (82%, up from 75%) and flexible working hours (66%, up from 62%).

#### More mental health first aiders and employee assistance programs but usage remains low

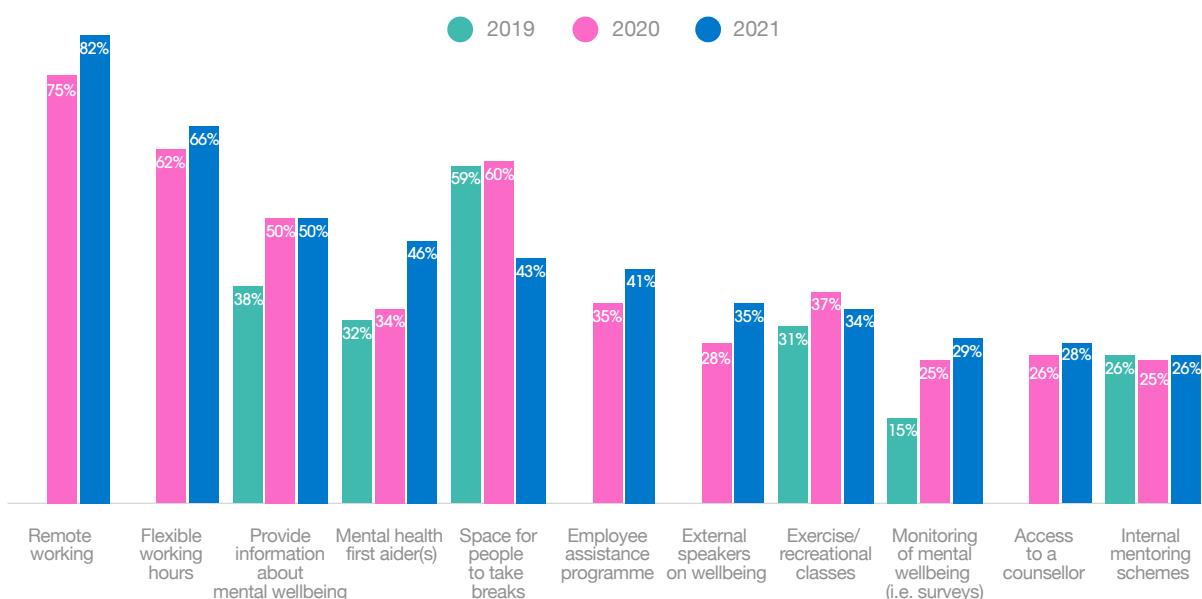
Mental health first aiders have risen dramatically this year, with 46% saying they have access to a mental health first aider (up from 34% in 2020). There have also been increases in support offered externally to the company, with 41% saying they have access to an employee assistance program (up from 35%) and 35% reporting that their company arranges for external speakers to come and talk about mental wellbeing to employees (up from 28%).

The usage of schemes such as mental health first aiders and employee assistance programs are still low (3% and 7% respectively) and are in line with figures from last year. Employers need to ensure that their workforce understand how to use and access these types of initiatives, encouraging pro-active use of these will also be beneficial.

## Less offered and using break spaces. A sign of changing working practises?

Perhaps unsurprisingly due to reduced office working, there has been a reduction in researchers having access to spaces to take breaks (43%, down from 60%). And looking at usage, only 25% of researchers currently make use of these spaces (down from 43% in 2020). These falls are not necessarily indicative of a negative change; they may be an indication of how working practises are changing more generally. However, with the rise of remote working, employers need to be mindful of encouraging employees to take breaks in other ways whilst out of the office.

### Initiatives offered by workplaces

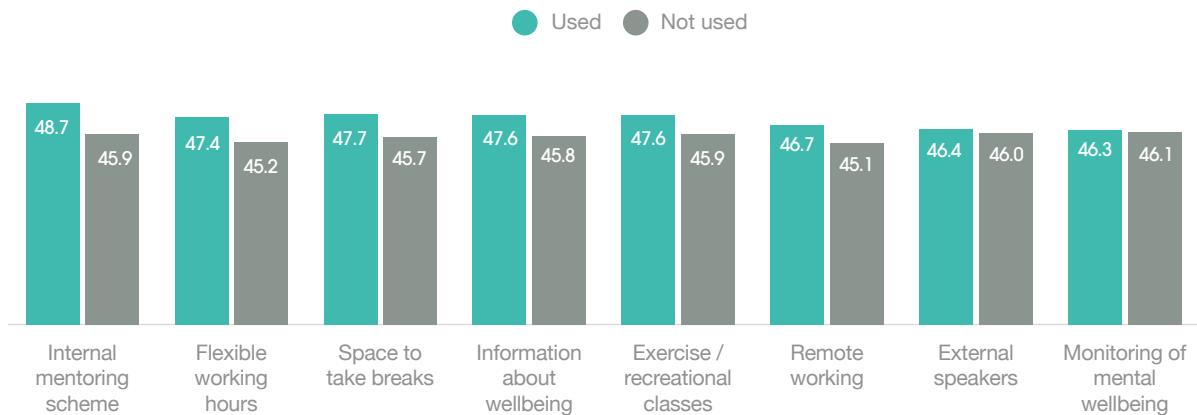


## Initiatives show demonstrable correlations with wellbeing scores

Looking deeper at the initiatives researchers have made use of there is a clear correlation between initiative usage and wellbeing (as measured by WEMWBS). Those who make use of certain wellbeing initiatives have higher wellbeing scores, and this is statistically significant in some instances.

Internal mentoring schemes appear to have the biggest impact here, with those who made use of this having significantly higher wellbeing scores than those who did not (48.7 vs. 45.9). This is followed by flexible working hours (47.4 vs. 45.2) and space to take breaks (47.7 vs. 45.7) – both show statistically significant differences.

## Wellbeing scores amongst those who use various initiatives



## There is demand for employers to do more to support employee wellbeing

Employees would like to see a number of different initiatives offered by employers to help support mental wellbeing. As with previous years, duvet / mental health days come out on top (45%), these are days that employees are allocated each year and can be taken off when they are not feeling 100% to look after their wellbeing. This is followed by monitoring of employee wellbeing (e.g. via a staff survey) (27%) and access to a counsellor (24%).

## Top 5 initiatives people want to see introduced by their employer:

**45% Duvet / mental health days**

**27% Monitoring of employee mental wellbeing  
(e.g. via a survey)**

**24% Access to a counsellor**

**22% Mandatory breaks**

**20% Internal mentoring scheme**

## **Employees want to see action taken to address workload and burnout culture**

Offering initiatives to support employee wellbeing is only one piece of the puzzle. Culture change around mental health and wellbeing at work still remains the top priority for employees, and is where many want to see employers take action. We asked researchers to tell us in their own words about what they want to see their employer do to support mental health, and the following themes emerged:

### **1. Encourage and enable good habits that benefit mental health**

Boundary setting was mentioned by many, specifically regarding employers encouraging employees to log off on time, take breaks throughout the day and also take their holiday allowance. Senior leaders setting good examples of this would help accelerate this culture change. Enabling and encouraging employees to set these boundaries and applauding those who do shows that the organisation prioritises employee wellbeing.

**"A change in culture would be beneficial. Would be good to see the executive level managers setting good examples e.g. taking proper holidays, breaks and not working 24/7. This sets the tone for how important your personal time is for your mental and physical well-being."**

**"Encouraging normal working hours so people don't work late and feel burnout"**

### **2. Acknowledge the impact of heavy workload and take action to address this ongoing issue.**

To allow people to set these boundaries, the issue of workload must be addressed. Heavy and unmanageable workloads continue to be mentioned by many as a key source of stress and poor mental health – they want to see employers take action to address this. It is disappointing to see that this is still such a huge issue year after year. There is a desire for employers to proactively stop employees from working late and being over worked, and ultimately stop this from being the norm. There are also issues with staffing levels for many organisations, which need to be tackled. If this major underlying issue is not addressed, then the authenticity of the organisation's views on mental health are put into question and wellbeing initiatives are made somewhat redundant.

"Have rules and limits around how many hours a day someone can work - most of my stress comes from the fact I have too much work and end up working early and late every day. There are all these schemes that are meant to support your mental health, but I probably wouldn't have the problems in the first place if my workload was reduced."

"An open-door policy, so that there is never a wrong time for a conversation, no matter how busy, so that mental wellbeing has a priority over deadlines etc."

"Taking action to tackle the root cause rather than superficial things like wellbeing weeks or pizza. Usually, the high workload is what affects my mental health most so putting into place robust practices that help prevent these crunch periods and allocation of workload better."

### 3. More of a focus on prevention of poor mental health, as well as reaction.

Researchers would like to see employers acting a more preventative and proactive way when it comes to supporting employee mental health. Whilst it is important to have support in place for those who are experiencing poor mental health, it would serve employers well to arm employees with the tools to maintain good mental health.

"Actively encourage good mental wellbeing with ideas and practices vs just acknowledging that poor mental wellbeing exists."

"Prevent burnout from happening by looking at workloads proactively. Allow us to take mental health days at short notice with no questions asked."

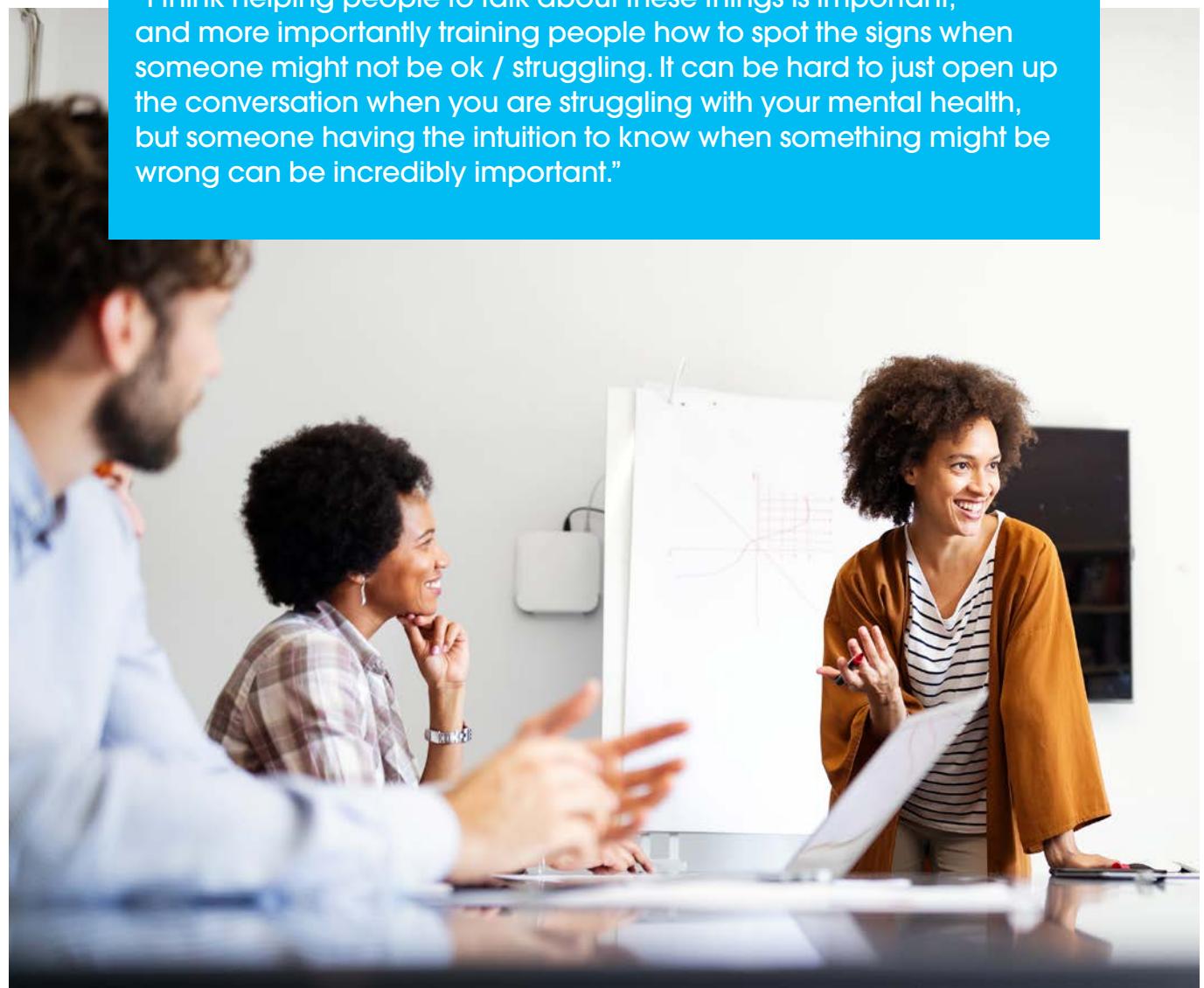


#### 4. And as seen in previous years, researchers still want to see more open conversations around mental health

A more open culture around mental health and that everyone has it is something researchers would like to see more of from their employers. Some suggest that senior members of teams could share stories of their personal experiences of mental health to help people feel more comfortable. Training here would also help these conversation to happen; specifically training to spot the signs of poor mental health and have proactive conversations with people about how they are doing which might encourage people to open up.

**"Encouraging people to speak up about mental health issues in the same way they do for physical health. I think there's still a stigma there, especially as a Senior person. I'd like colleagues coming up in their careers to know that even Directors suffer from anxiety and depression - maybe it will give them confidence that no-one is immune to feeling not enough?"**

**"I think helping people to talk about these things is important, and more importantly training people how to spot the signs when someone might not be ok / struggling. It can be hard to just open up the conversation when you are struggling with your mental health, but someone having the intuition to know when something might be wrong can be incredibly important."**



## 4. ENSURE FLEXIBILITY IS INCORPORATED INTO WORKING PRACTISES POST-COVID

The outbreak of the coronavirus and the resulting lockdowns have hugely disrupted traditional working patterns. For some, it has meant working from home and the various benefits and challenges that has brought. For others, especially key workers or those with fewer protections at work, it has sometimes meant longer hours and more precarious conditions. Most of us working in market research fall into the former category. Whilst we should count ourselves lucky that we can keep safe at home, the past 18 months or so has by no means been easy.

Nonetheless, the overwhelming finding from our research is that on balance employees have enjoyed working from home and want flexible working to become the new norm.

So what should working patterns look like when we come out of the pandemic? The benefits of working from home have been numerous and workers don't want to loose that. Equally, many appreciate that being in the office can provide routine, socialising, and better team-working. The overwhelming message is that employees want flexibility, in other words the ability to decide the working patterns that work for them.

### Three-quarters say their employer has handled the pandemic well

It's good news then that the vast majority of those working in the industry (76%) believe that their employer has handled the pandemic well.

There were some interesting differences. For example, those working in-house/client side are more likely to say this is the case (83%) than those working for an agency (76%).

As well as feeling that their employer has handled the pandemic well, 85% of those working in the market research industry say their employer has been supportive towards them during the pandemic.

## Working from home became the norm for the industry

Among those active in their role, 98% said they were working from home all or some of the time.

This speaks to two factors; the first is that half (49%) of those active in their role where already working from in some capacity prior to the pandemic, the second is that the day-to-day tasks of the typical market research employee can be done from home. In other words, the market research industry was already in a good position to adapt to the working patterns of the lockdown.

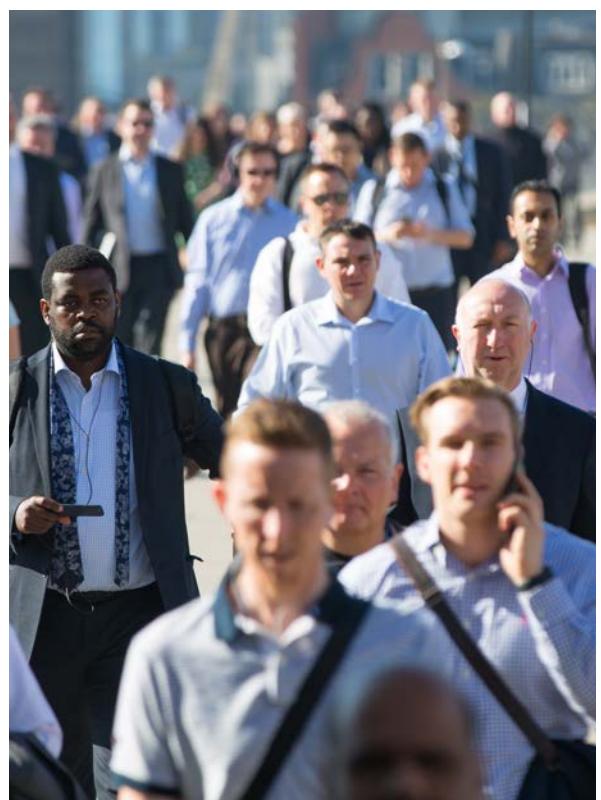
## Two-thirds say not having to commute has improved their mental health

Working from home presented us with many benefits; the chance to have more free time, not needing to commute, and of course the safety of isolating - a luxury which many other workers didn't experience. However, it was not without its challenges. Many of us found it harder to separate work and leisure, and the monotony of working where we live became somewhat draining.

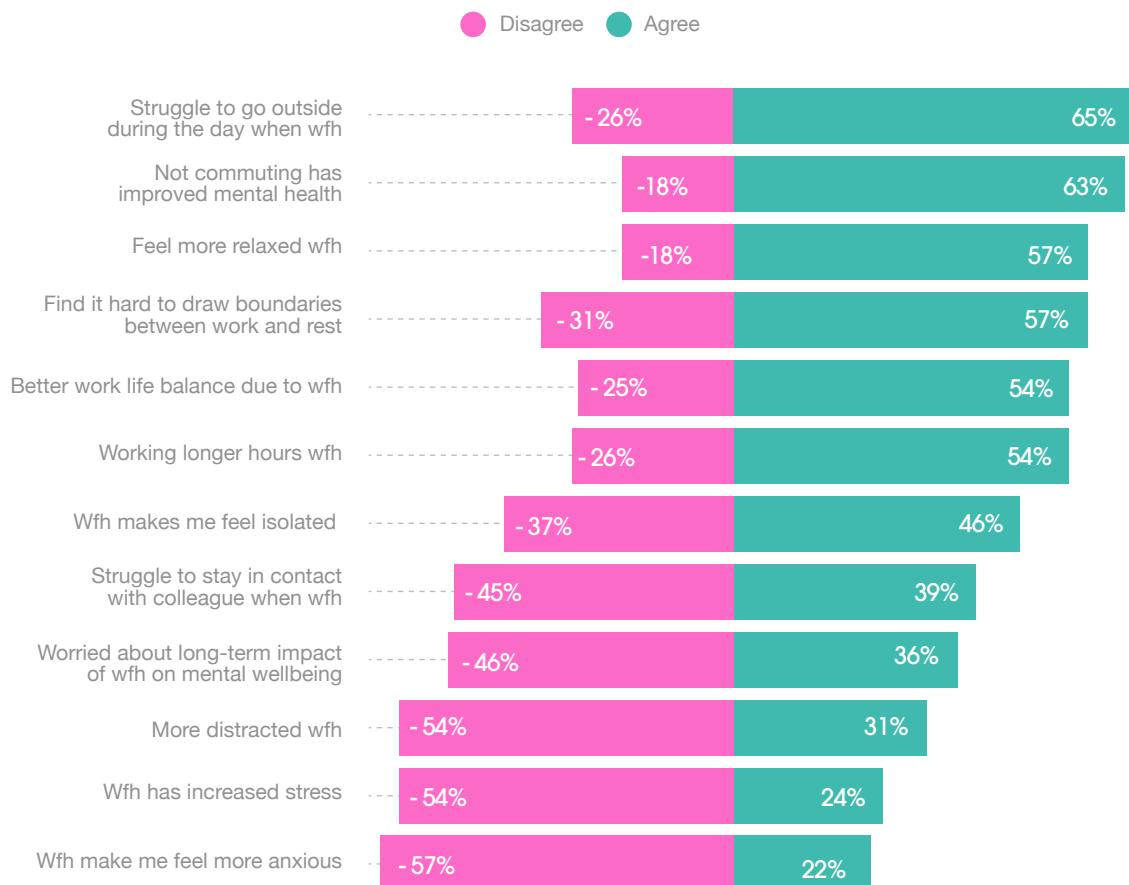
Indeed, this was borne out in our research. In the chart below we can see the clear benefits. Almost two-thirds (63%), said their mental health improved as a result of not having to commute. A similar proportion (57%) found that they feel more relaxed working from home, and 54% said they had a better work life balance as a result.

On the other hand, 65% said they found it hard to build in time to go outside when working from home, 57% said drawing boundaries between work and rest was difficult, and 54% said they were working longer hours as a result of working from home.

We also found that some negative experiences have been felt by more people as the lockdown has worn on. For example, in the research we ran in 2020, 45% said they found it hard to keep in contact with colleagues. This increased to 58% this year. Similarly, 48% said they found it hard to draw boundaries between work and rest in 2020, increasing to 58% this year.



## Pros and Cons of working from home on mental wellbeing



When we asked people to tell us a bit more about why they had found working from home negative for their mental health many of the responses chimed with the findings cited above.

**“My hours are significantly longer, as well as juggling kids and family life. My desk is directly next to my bed, so it’s ALWAYS there.”**

**“There are many positives to working from home and in some ways I am more relaxed, but I really miss the routine and the team aspect of being in the office. As a manager it is much more difficult to manage a team remotely.”**

**“There are many positives to working from home and in some ways I am more relaxed, but I really miss the routine and the team aspect of being in the office. As a manager it is much more difficult to manage a team remotely.”**

**“There is no off button from work, 24/7 emails calls Whatsapp messages.”**

## The effects on working from home on mental health are mixed

This mixed picture that emerges, where working from home has many benefits but also some drawbacks, is reflected in the fact that whilst a third (36%) say working from home has improved their mental health, 35% say the opposite. This is much the same as last years findings.

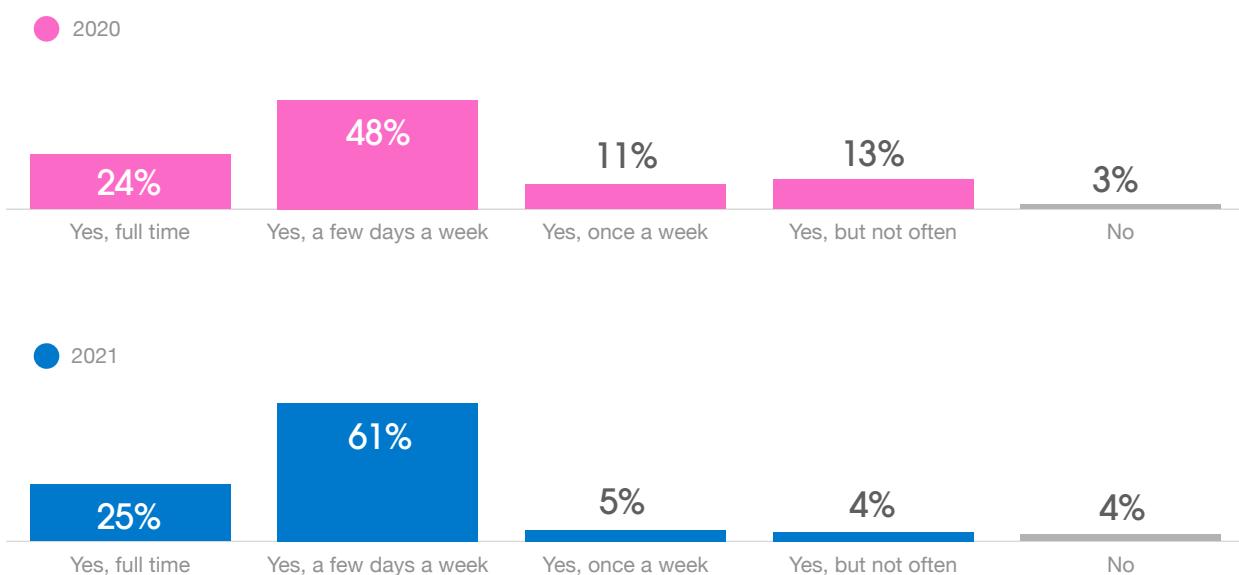
Younger workers, and those in junior or entry level jobs are more likely to say that working from home has decreased their mental wellbeing, as well as those in larger organisations.

## The majority want to carry on working from home when the pandemic is over

Despite there being some draw backs to working from home, 95% say they would like to continue working from home in some capacity when the pandemic is over. A quarter, 25%, would like do so full time, whereas 61% would like to do so a few days a week. Interestingly, this latter figure (61%) has risen over the last year from 48% in 2020 suggesting that we've become more accustomed to working from home.

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Would you like to continue to work from home once the coronavirus pandemic is over? 2020 and 2021



## Mixed emotions about a return to the office

We then asked research to tell us how they felt about returning to the office at some point in the future. We did so by asking them to place themselves on a scale between two opposing feelings e.g. apprehensive vs. excited. The results are charted below, and again we can see a mixed picture. For example, 38% say they are relaxed about a return to the office but 36% say they are anxious.

That said, employees tend to be more upbeat about a return to the office than they were last year. For example in 2020 29% said they were excited compared to 38% this year. Similarly, whereas 46% said they were anxious last year this has dropped to 36% this year.

From an employer perspective, it's good to see that employees are feeling slightly better about a possible return than a year ago, but the picture is still a mixed one, with some employees feeling very different to others. In terms of how employers should respond, these findings further support the idea that flexibility is key; in other words, allowing employees to choose working patterns that work best for them.

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### Feelings about returning to the office



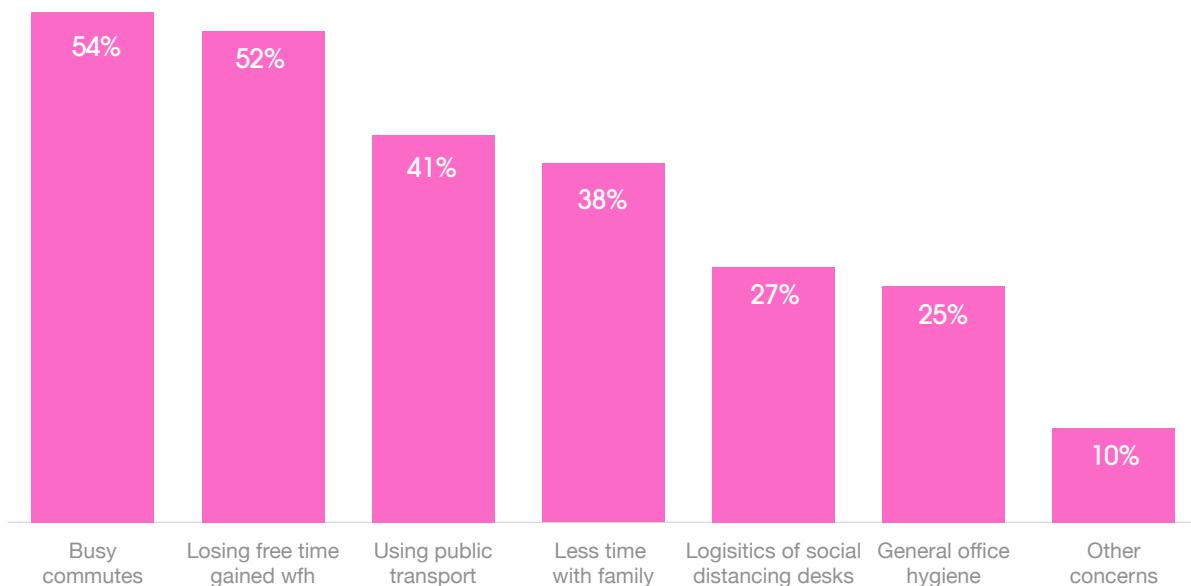
## Commuting and losing free time are the biggest concerns about the return to the office

Looking at what concerns might be driving some of these negative feelings around returning to the office, 54% cited the busy commute causing concern and 52% said it would be losing the free time they have gained from working from home.

In terms of how this compares to the situation last year, 38% are concerned about losing time with their families up from 28% last year. On the other hand, people are less concerned about the logistics of social distancing (27% - down from 50% in 2020) and less concerned about general office hygiene (25% - down from 42% in 2020).



### Concerns about returning to the office



## 5. FURTHER SUPPORT IS NEEDED FOR NEURODIVERGENT RESEARCHERS

All of us experience the world in very different ways and everyone's perspective is unique. This is particularly true of those who are neurodivergent. People are neurodivergent think and process information slightly differently from most people. This might mean that they socialise, learn, or interact with the world and other people in different ways. It can sometimes mean that they face challenges that the rest of us don't face and this can have effects on their mental wellbeing.

This year we decided to investigate how those who describe themselves as neurodivergent find the working world.\*

Unfortunately, 43% of those who are neurodivergent say that they are not supported at all in respect to their condition. However, the same figure say they are supported in some way. Around three in five (60%) say they have anxiety around their condition, 67% worry that people will treat them differently and 77% say businesses need to have more open conversations about the subject.

We asked those who say they haven't received any support what their employers could do and they cited a number things from being more patient to listening more.

"They need to be patient"

"Understand that there will always be typos in my work! It's not just down to carelessness on my part. Also, it takes me longer to read stuff (e.g. transcripts etc) so I will always be slower than my colleagues unfortunately."

"Just keep the dialogue open on which kinds of support I need."



\*The base size for the following stats is only 30. Whilst this is a representative proportion of workers in market research these stats should be taken as indicative only.

## CONCLUSIONS

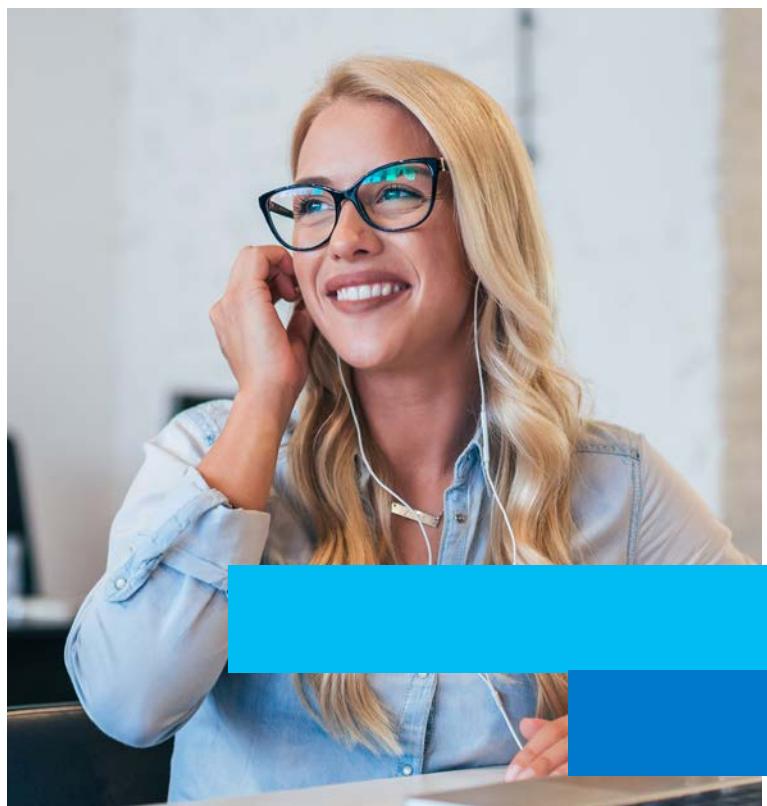
It's been a difficult and turbulent eighteen months, particularly regarding our mental wellbeing. Our report has shown that whilst our collective wellbeing scores remain much the same as 2020, an uptick and in stress, anxiety, and feeling low down were all recorded.

Market research is a hectic and fast-paced industry and whilst this makes it an exciting industry to work in it also means that long-hours and intense workloads can sometimes get the better of us. Indeed, deadlines and targets were some of the key factors that employees cited as causes of low mental wellbeing.

The good news is that employers are taking notice and our research has found that there are more programmes and initiatives available to workers. Similarly, we are getting much better at talking openly and honestly about mental health. However, the fundamental causes of low mental health at work remain the same; long-hours and heavy workloads. If employees can deal with these factors, along with other essentials like pay and conditions then we may start to see real, tangible improvements in mental health.

The pandemic presents a perfect chance for us to reconfigure how we work. The report has shown that employees have really benefitted from working from home and are happier for being closer to loved ones, not having to commute, and being able to be more flexible with their working patterns. Equally, they still appreciate the benefits of going into work whether it be seeing their colleagues or getting out of the house.

Ultimately, the market research industry can choose to seize this moment and create a flexible working structure that gives workers the power to choose working patterns that suit them. We can use this as a chance to reassess what 'manageable' looks like when it comes to workload and emphasise the 'life' in 'work-life balance'.



# AUTHORS



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Sophie is passionate about mental health and holds a BA Hons in Experimental Psychology from the University of Oxford. She developed Opinium's workplace mental wellbeing audit and heads up Opinium's mental health research team. Sophie also leads the internal wellbeing team at Opinium, introducing workplace initiatives to support employee mental wellbeing. Sophie works on a variety of different projects from design to delivery, ranging from large-scale quantitative studies to in-depth qualitative research projects. She is heavily involved in the brand and comms space, with a particular focus on health, wellness and social research.

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## Joe Curran

Joe works across a number of practice areas with a particular interest in the third-sector and public affairs. Most recently he has worked with charities helping refine their communications strategy through quantitative and qualitative research. He is a member of the political polling team and Opinium's Mental Wellbeing Team.



## Raven Ddungu

Raven works on a variety of projects utilising both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to help clients better understand consumer attitudes and behaviours. Raven is heavily involved in the brand and comms and thought leadership spaces and more recently, she has been involved in social research, geared towards helping addicts who are in recovery.

## 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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## About The MRS

The Market Research Society (MRS) is the UK professional body for research, insight and analytics. We recognise 5,000 members and 550 Accredited Company Partners who are committed to delivering outstanding insight. As the regulator, we promote the highest professional standards throughout the sector via the MRS Code of Conduct. We consult with business and government leaders to ensure that research stays at the forefront of commercial and political agendas, while supporting the sector with specialist training and qualifications, membership, company accreditation, insightful conferences, research awards and advice on best practice.

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