

# A path to better workplace mental health: Reorienting approaches and priorities

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Research conducted by:



This report was prepared by High Lantern Group for Retirement & Personal Wealth Solutions at Bank of America

## Executive summary

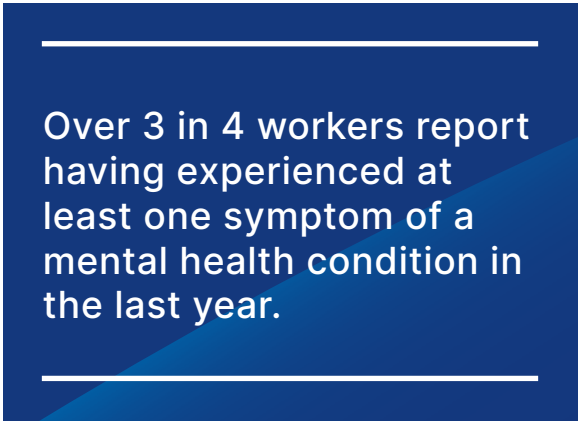
# A path to better workplace mental health: reorienting approaches and priorities

In the last three years, the COVID-19 pandemic has raised employee mental well-being for many organizations from an underrepresented line item in company wellness offerings to a foremost strategic imperative. Pandemic and economic uncertainties have exacerbated stress, disengagement, and resignations among employees. Over 3 in 4 workers report having experienced at least one symptom of a mental health condition in the last year, and over 1 in 3 report that their symptoms have lasted 5 months to a year.<sup>1</sup> Burnout has become a staple of workplace lexicons, and an experience that disproportionately impacts women, low-income workers, people of color, and younger employees.<sup>2</sup>

In response to the changing environment, employers have made unprecedented investments in mental health. 90% of employers reported increasing their investment in 2022,<sup>3</sup> and 80% of HR leaders globally report mental health and well-being as a top organizational priority.<sup>4</sup>

Under this elevated attention, the catalogue of mental health solutions has also grown. New ideas about what it means to address workplace mental health have proliferated rapidly—from digital tools to new paradigms of employer responsibility. Employers now have access to a wider variety of tools and strategies to choose from than ever before.

Taking action in the face of these options can feel challenging. And as the acute stress from COVID-19 wanes, employers may be tempted to pull away



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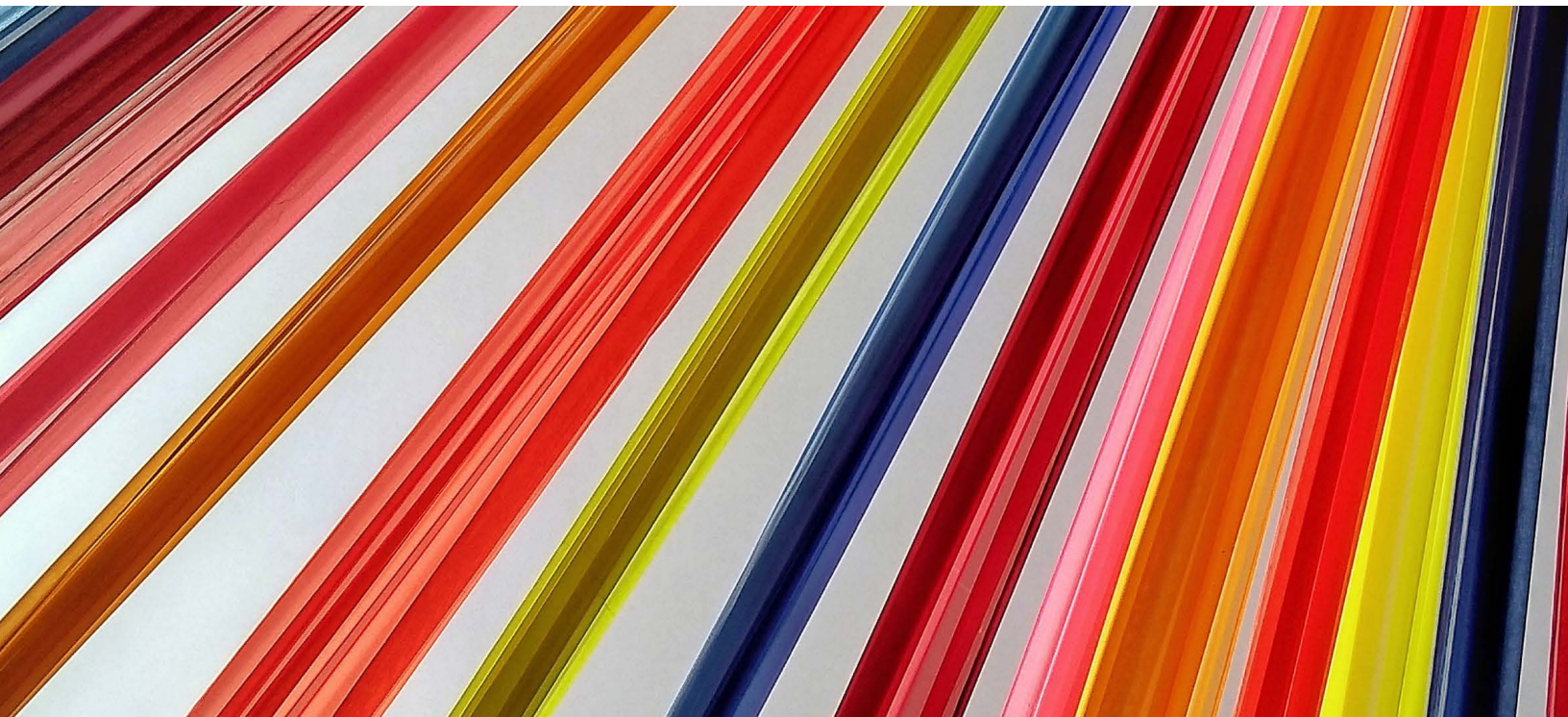
## **A path to better workplace mental health: reorienting approaches and priorities**

from their focus on employee mental well-being.

But mental health challenges in the workforce have existed long before this pivotal pandemic began—and that they will persist even after the pandemic abates. Companies taking a long-term view will not scale back on workplace mental health altogether but rather seize the opportunity to evaluate these new ideas and reallocate their efforts towards the most effective solutions for their workforce.

This report seeks to contribute to this conversation by:

- examining how the workplace mental health landscape has evolved;
- exploring the challenges that employers face in seeking to address workplace mental health; and
- assessing how organizations can gauge the efficacy of emerging solutions.





## A new workplace mental health landscape

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, workplace support for mental health was evolving. The conventional expectation of mental health as a personal topic to be kept separate from work responsibilities has given way to a greater understanding of the importance of mental health in the workplace as a driver of individual and organizational success.

Not only are employers uniquely positioned to influence a positive shift in the mental well-being of their employees—given full time employees spend an average of 50% of their waking life at their place of work—but employers have also recognized that creating a supportive environment for employee mental health makes good business sense. Poor employee mental health drives negative outcomes in the workplace, from low engagement to diminished productive capacity to greater rates of absenteeism. Depression alone costs the U.S. economy over \$210 billion each year from lost productivity and absences.<sup>5</sup> Inadequate mental health support also increases attrition. Employees struggling with their well-being at work are four times more likely to report an intent to leave the organization.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, supporting employee mental health makes an impact on vital HR priorities. A strong system of support for workplace mental health can not only reduce employee turnover, saving employers time and money associated with recruiting and training new employees, but also increase workforce satisfaction and productivity, and help an employer stand out in attracting and retaining high-quality talent.

Spurred on by the COVID-19 pandemic, four key trends have further reshaped the workplace mental health landscape:

**1. Greater mental health needs**

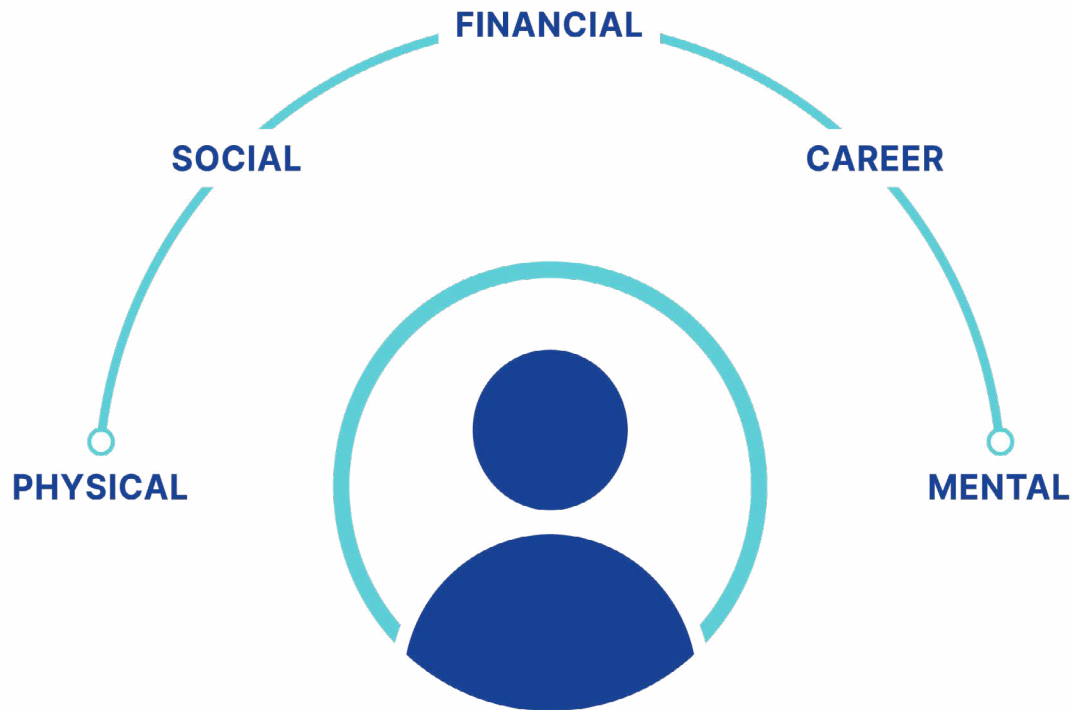
The stress and economic uncertainty of COVID-19 both surfaced and exacerbated pre-existing workplace mental health challenges. In just the first year of the pandemic, the global prevalence of anxiety and depression grew by 25%.<sup>7</sup> This growth has disproportionately impacted diverse employees, elevating the importance of mental health as

a diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging issue: a 2021 employee survey by Mind Share Partners found employees of color, LGBTQ+ employees, women, and younger workers reporting both worse mental health outcomes and a lower likelihood of seeking help for their mental health symptoms.<sup>8</sup>

**2. Greater employee expectations**

Employees, especially younger

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employees, are taking an increasingly holistic view of their well-being—prioritizing additional facets of well-being like financial and mental well-being alongside their physical health. And they are placing increasing expectations on employers to do the same. In fact, 81% of employees surveyed by the American Psychological Association identified an employer’s mental health support as an important factor when looking for future work opportunities.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Greater societal and employer attention

Sharper public scrutiny of workplace mental health strategies has resulted in sharper employer attention to workplace mental health around

the world. A 2022 McKinsey study found that four out of five HR leaders identify mental health and well-being as an organizational top priority.<sup>10</sup> A 2022 Employee Wellness Industry Trends report by Wellable Labs reveals that nearly all of surveyed employers (90%) increased their investment in mental health programs—and around three out of four had increased investments in related programs for stress management, resilience, and mindfulness and meditation.<sup>11</sup>

### 4. More mental health solutions

Under this elevated attention and investment, mental health solutions have proliferated. The digital mental health space, in particular,

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has grown rapidly to meet the accelerated demand. From 2020 to 2021, the mental health apps market saw a 23.7% increase in revenue growth.<sup>12</sup> 20,000 mental health apps are available across Android and Apple operating systems.<sup>13</sup>

However, despite the proliferation of solutions and the evident need for mental health support, individuals are not seeing a corresponding benefit to their mental health. According to Gartner's 2021 EVP Benchmarking Survey, while 87% of employees have mental and emotional well-being offerings available to them, just 23% actually use them. Employee assistance program (EAP) expansions, for instance, have been a particularly popular checklist item for many workplaces' mental health strategies, but are extremely underutilized by employees due to discomfort with their one-size-fits-all approach, the fact that many EAPs are only accessible through a phone call—sometimes without trained personnel staffing the phone lines—and privacy concerns.

Consequently, even as the COVID-19 pandemic abates, mental health remains low:

- A December Gallup poll shows a mere 31% of Americans rating their mental health as excellent—the lowest percentage in over 20 years.<sup>14</sup>
- The American Psychiatric Association's Healthy Minds Monthly Poll found that, in December 2022, 37% of Americans considered

their mental health as fair or poor, compared to 31% in December 2021.<sup>15</sup>

- The same poll also reveals that over one in four Americans expect their stress to grow in 2023, up from one in five in 2022.<sup>16</sup>

The numbers reveal that increases in employer investments across different categories of mental health supports have not translated into an equal level of improvement in workplace mental health metrics. This gap presents a crucial opportunity for employers to thoughtfully re-evaluate their mental health strategies. Employers that can successfully reprioritize their focus towards the most effective mental health solutions are likely to see an increase in employee satisfaction, retention rates, and productivity over time—and help drive towards better, more sustainable, and more inclusive workplaces.

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## A multi-level perspective of mental health challenges

Creating an effective workplace mental health strategy requires a clear understanding of the mental health barriers that employees face. These barriers result from a combination of persistent dynamics at three different levels: the systemic, the organizational, and the individual experience. Recognizing which dynamics are at play and how they shape employee access to and utilization of mental health supports can help an employer better achieve their intended impact.

Mental health challenges result from a combination of barriers at different levels.



### Systemic barriers

Fragmented healthcare landscape;  
limited geographical availability;  
provider quality

### Organizational barriers

Diverse workforce needs; accessibility;  
culture & stigma

### Individual barriers

Time and resource constraints;  
perceptions of solutions offered; need  
for privacy

### Systemic Barriers

The health system itself poses confusing and costly structural challenges to employers seeking to strengthen their mental health supports—and to employees looking for specialized mental health services.

Chief among these challenges is the fragmentation of the healthcare

landscape, which separates mental health services from other medical services, like primary care, in terms of their delivery and financing mechanisms. Just 20% of mental health practitioners accept some forms of insurance, and psychiatrists are 50% more likely to manage single-provider practices than other physician specialties.<sup>17</sup> Care seekers trying to enter the pipeline often



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do not know where to begin: should they start with a primary care provider and obtain a referral, or call the insurance company or EAP instead? These service silos can lead to a lack of coordination between mental health care providers and other services and make it more difficult for individuals to navigate the care landscape.

The variety of mental health professionals—from therapists to psychologists to psychiatrists—further adds to the complexity of the mental health care ecosystem. Care seekers may not understand the differences between these sometimes-overlapping terms, and as a result, struggle to connect to the appropriate supports in a timely way and access the care they need.

Additionally, mental health providers are not as readily accessible as other medical providers. There is a chronic shortage of high-quality mental health providers, especially

in certain geographic areas or for certain populations. In fact, over 129 million Americans lived in a federally designated mental health professional shortage area in 2021.<sup>18</sup> In other words, not even one-third of the U.S. population was living in an area with a sufficient supply of mental health professionals to meet the exigent local demand. Even when individuals can find a provider with the capacity to accept new patients, providers may still have limited hours or availability for appointments, resulting in lengthy wait times. Some states, including California, Texas, and Maryland, have sought to address this issue with legislation imposing wait time limits on health insurers—but reports of five to six week waits reveal that care quality challenges remain.<sup>19</sup>

Accelerated by the pandemic, telehealth options for mental health care have proliferated to fill in some of the gaps in the ecosystem. However,



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telehealth solutions entail their own set of challenges. First, they may exclude the 25% of low-income adults who do not own smartphones, or the 40% of low-income adults without either internet or computers at home.<sup>20</sup> Second, many of the policies changes that enabled the growth of telehealth services are linked to the government's public health emergency declaration (PHE) during COVID-19—such as the use of non-HIPAA compliant platforms like WhatsApp and FaceTime for delivering healthcare services—and expire when the PHE expires, unless incorporated into federal law. Finally, digital solutions add to the complexity of the healthcare ecosystem, creating another pathway that employees must evaluate to determine which services best fit their needs.

These systemic issues are often beyond the control of individual organizations but can still impact employee mental health and make designing an effective workplace mental health strategy more difficult.

### **Organizational Barriers**

Challenges at the organizational level can also limit employee access and drive low utilization. Existing mental health resources, for instance, may not be the “right” ones for the employee population (e.g., they are not available in the preferred platform, do not offer the preferred services or have a financial barrier, for instance.) Geographically or functionally diverse employee populations are likely to have a wide range of needs and preferences—language, for instance—

and an employer's mental health strategy may not include the right mix of benefits to appeal to different individual preferences or access needs or provide the right kinds of support.

A lack of effective data collection and measurement mechanisms reinforces this barrier. The ability to measure which solutions are working and which are not is crucial to help employers understand where they are succeeding and where they can improve. However, measuring the effectiveness of a mental health program requires defining what “good” looks like in the organizational context, and considering how indicators are used for analyzing a highly complex and multi-dimensional concept of “improved mental health.” It may also require information from providers about the availability of high-quality or evidence-based practitioners, which may be difficult for employers to access or hold networks accountable for providing.

Meanwhile, organizational stigma about mental health undercuts the benefits that an employer does provide. Employers have traditionally placed mental health stigma reduction efforts at the bottom of their priorities,<sup>21</sup> and employees that do not feel a sense of psychological safety are less likely to disclose their mental health concerns, let alone seek help. In 2021, McKinsey found that 75% believe that stigma around mental health persists in their workplaces,<sup>22</sup> but just 6% of employees reported knowing of an anti-stigma campaign at work.<sup>23</sup>

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Finally, poor leadership support for mental health limits the efficacy of workplace mental health strategies. Good leadership support refers not only to leadership buy-in, a basic prerequisite for a well-resourced workplace mental health strategy, but also to leaders' roles in actively promoting workplace mental health. In 2021, a lack of leadership communication on mental health was the most commonly cited obstacle to self-care.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Individual Experience Barriers***

Even when the right mental health benefits are made available, employees experience their own resource constraints, privacy concerns, and perceptions of available supports that can prevent them from accessing the support that could benefit them.

Accessing mental health support often takes time and resources—and employees, especially frontline employees, may not have the extra capacity to spare. Childcare, a lack of reliable transportation, and other personal responsibilities and unmet social needs can all place competing pressures on employees. And when employees have two or more unmet social needs, they become 30% more likely to find it difficult to access counselling or other mental health services.<sup>25</sup>

Privacy concerns can also prevent employees from seeking out the support they need through workplace resources, especially amongst minority groups. Fewer than 50% of employees feel comfortable sharing their mental

health with supervisors or coworkers<sup>26</sup> and employees see privacy and anonymity protections as their number one consideration when accessing online support services.<sup>27</sup> Younger employees, in particular, feel they are just establishing their reputation and may worry that seeking help will lead their supervisors and colleagues to view them as less capable of performing their job duties.

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Poor employee perception of the quantity, quality, or efficacy of the offered mental health supports and benefits further decreases their willingness to see these supports as worth their time, effort, and trust. In other cases, employees may not even aware of which resources are available or find it difficult to navigate to the covered service options that are right for them.

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### **Overlapping Levels of Analysis**

Importantly, these three different levels interact with each other to impact how employees engage with, and ultimately benefit from employer-provided mental health support. Recognizing how these factors interact is the crucial difference between simply providing mental health services and benefits and providing support that employees can access meaningfully and use effectively for better mental health outcomes.

There is increasing attention on one particularly difficult overlap to address: how the design of organizations themselves intersects with and exacerbates individual-level barriers to mental health. According to Mind Share Partners' 2021 Report, from

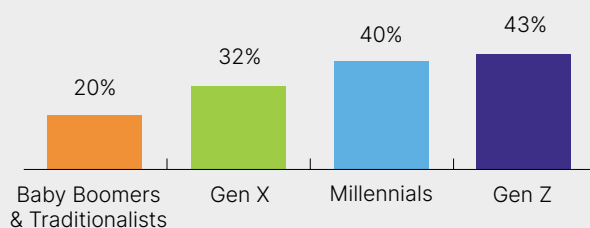
2019 to 2021, 42% of individuals cite challenges specific to the day-to-day functioning of their workplaces as the leading driver of their need for mental health support.<sup>28</sup> Workplace dynamics—including poor work-life balance workload, lack of recognition, weak workplace relationships, and lack of managerial support—can all impact an employee's ability to experience positive mental health.

The challenges in this overlap speak to a broader need for employers to move beyond individual benefits programs or technology solutions—towards a culture that integrates its prioritization of employee mental health into how it operates day-to-day.

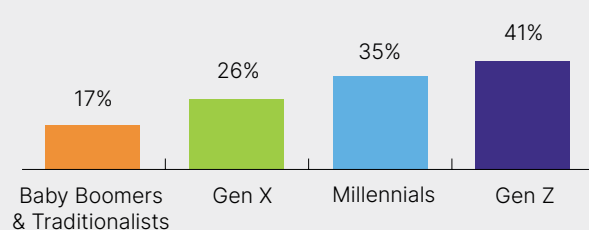
### Spotlight: SHRM Research finds generational divide in job-related mental health impacts

Recent findings from SHRM Research survey of 1,000 U.S. workers from March 2023 reveal that age plays an important role in how work affects mental health.

**% of U.S. workers who report their job has had a negative impact on their mental health over the past 6 months**



**% of U.S. workers who report their job has made them feel anxious at least weekly in the past 6 months**



Source: 2023 State of Mental Health, SHRM, 2023

## Evaluating Emerging Trends in Workplace Mental Health Solutions

Employers have four primary levers at their disposal to address key challenges and affect change to improve mental health in their workplaces:

1. **Principles:** The overarching guidance for employer responsibility for supporting employee mental health
2. **Policies:** The benefits and supports the employer provides to address mental health needs, which can include a broad range of wellness activities and guidance
3. **Programs:** The approach for disseminating information and connecting individuals to available mental health solutions
4. **People Management:** How the organization embeds mental health support in the ways the employees and managers interact



### 1. Principles

Principles anchor the other three more tactical levers, and COVID-19 has spurred a fundamental shift in how employers think about what good workplace mental health looks like and what it takes to get there. Central to this shift is the understanding that mental health is something employees have all the time, whether good or bad, and that it intersects with all aspects of their lives. As a



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result, the benchmark for good has grown into a more holistic tapestry of support for employee well-being, with an understanding of the interrelationship between its physical, social, financial, career and mental dimensions.

Recognizing mental health as a persistent spectrum of experience has also created opportunities for employers to expand their perspective on mental health supports from reactive care for employees experiencing poor mental health to introducing new solutions that target prevention, risk reduction, and early detection to meet the needs of employees seeking to maintain good mental health.

At the same time, a new growing framework for employer responsibility seeks to provide a psychologically safe, sustainable space where employees can access the mental health services they choose. It sees the gap between growing employer investment and stagnant-to-declining employee mental health as the result of an overreliance on a checklist of singular or siloed solutions. Specific mental health resources remain crucial but insufficient: as the 2021 Mind Share Partners Report reveals, an open mental health culture is the “resource” that employees most desire.<sup>29</sup>

Operationalizing this new paradigm for workplace mental health and closing the gap will look different for different workplaces, but employers have responded to elevated mental health needs with new ideas about how to leverage their policies, programs, and people management. Below, we highlight the key trends across these three levers.

### Spotlight: Mind Share Partners’ insights on new employee expectations

The age of perks is over. Coinciding with the pandemic, exploration of remote and hybrid work models, a re-evaluation of the meaning of work, and growing discourse around employee rights, voice, and power, employees are less focused on the “glitz and glam” of trendy, sometimes superfluous workplace perks. Increasingly, we are seeing employees seek three things:

- **A “back-to-basics”**—in other words, the “foundations” of a healthy workplace, which includes things like livable and equitable wages, predictable schedules, stable employment, opportunities for growth, and robust and inclusive mental health benefits.
- **A voice.** Autonomy and flexibility have become near trite in their pervasiveness in conversations about the future of work. The underlying theme is the ability for employees to decide the what, where, when, and how of their work.
- **A safe and sustainable experience of work.** Whether it be through optimizing meetings, flexibility in working location, communication and support from leadership, or even four-day work weeks, employees are seeking a healthy and sustainable day-to-day experience of work itself.

*Source: 2021 Mental Health at Work Report, Mind Share Partners, 2021*

## **2. Policies**

### **A well-being umbrella of benefits**

As a result of the understanding that employee well-being relies on interrelated factors, employers have rolled out more holistic benefits that recognize the role of social determinants of health—and cover a broader spectrum of needs, from prevention to treatment. These include exercise programs, meditation services, financial education and planning, and parental support. Some progressive employers have even extended these benefits to employees' family members, with the understanding that an employee's family well-being can significantly affect their well-being and performance.

Such benefits can offer important table-stakes supports to employees to address non-work-related sources of stress; however, importantly, how employers communicate about these benefits matters. In the hierarchy of information with which employers often bombard employees, benefits information is often deprioritized, resulting in an incomplete understanding and underutilization of available benefits.

### **Building role flexibility**

Employers have increasingly attempted to attract top talent by empowering employees with the ability to choose the work locations that they value and exercise greater control over their own schedules to manage their work-life balance. These policies have aligned well with employee priorities: a 2022 poll found that employees consider work/life balance to be the number one workplace factor influencing their mental health,<sup>30</sup> and 86% of workers report satisfaction with the flexibility in their work schedule.<sup>31</sup>

However, how employers talk about that flexibility matters. For instance, many employers chose to elevate dedicated mental health days during COVID-19. By separating mental health out specifically, such policies can counterproductively signal to employees that the organization's general leave policies undervalue their mental health.

### **Growth of digital services**

Even before COVID-19, employers showed interest in exploring the opportunities provided by digital services to address the geographical, logistical, and time constraints that limit employee access to quality mental health resources. Digital tools provide scalable, affordable, personalized, and anonymous support to employees when they need it.

But mental health apps alone are not an equal substitute for face-to-face counseling services. Employee preferences are not homogenous, and many

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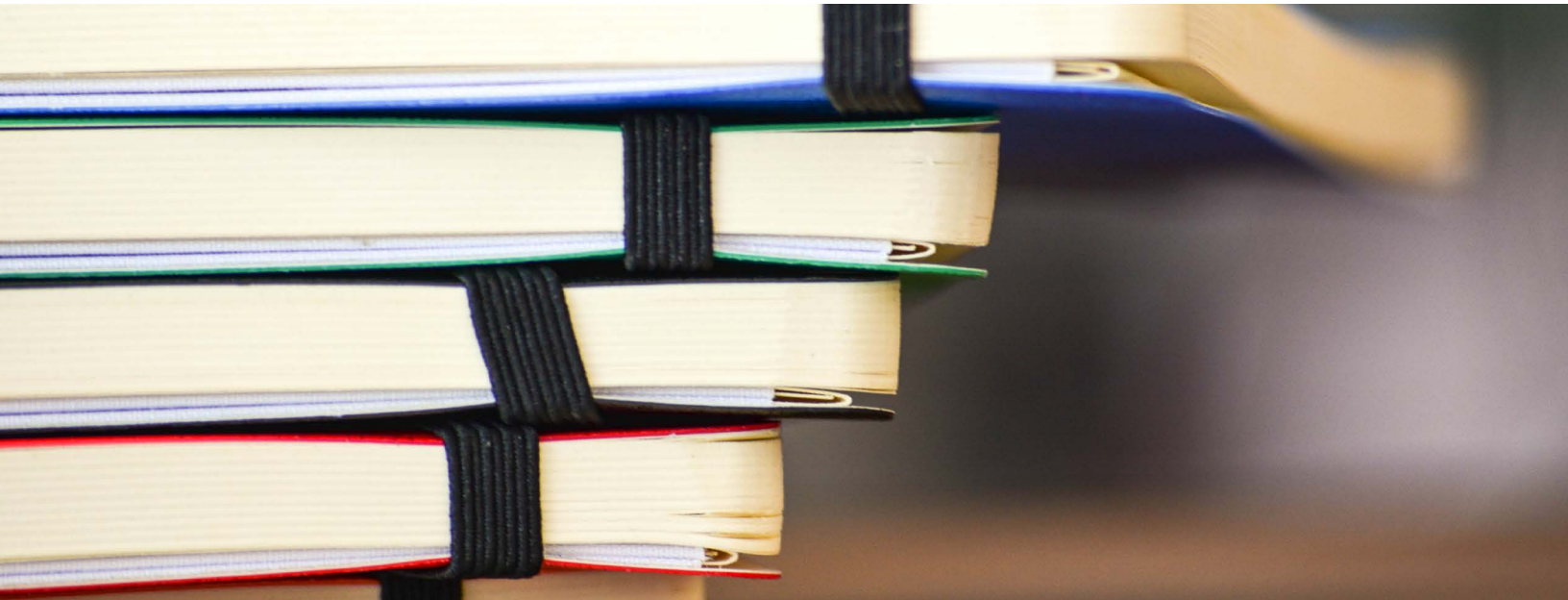
perceive digital health as impersonal or less effective—especially amongst younger populations, as Lifework’s soon-to-be-published November report finds—or feel uncomfortable leaving a footprint of digital data on their mental well-being. Moreover, with the significant influx of mental health apps in the last two years, employers must carefully select the right service for their employees and confirm the clinical basis for its offered solutions.

Ultimately, employers that leverage digital tools most effectively continue to pair them with robust coverage for in-person therapy with quality providers.

### **Greater scrutiny of benefits providers**

Employers are beginning to pay more attention to the benefits they are buying, both digital and in-person, holding provider systems proactively accountable for high-quality, evidence-based, value-driven service. To address the issue of ghost networks—provider networks that have not been updated to reflect the current, available, in-network roster of mental health professionals—some employers have leveraged “secret shoppers” to audit their options.

Beyond availability, other criteria include the expertise and training of in-network providers, satisfaction of employees who use these services, and the demographics of the provider network with the goal of achieving inclusive mental health care.



### **3. Programming**

#### **Leadership signaling**

While baseline benefits are important, employees are looking for more to build a truly open, positive, and safe mental health workplace culture.

And how leaders talk about mental health has a particularly significant influence on how mental health is perceived within an organization. Leaders are increasingly leveraging their visibility within organizations to highlight mental health as a priority, share their own experiences to create common ground, and shift their workplaces towards a more open, psychologically safe culture. According to Mind Share Partners' 2021 Report, the number of employees who felt their leaders were advocates for mental health grew by 27% from 2019 to 2021.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, leaders themselves may experience their own stigma and uncertainty about sharing their vulnerabilities. Hence, finding mental health champions at the earliest stages of a shift in strategy to better support mental health is crucial.

#### **Centralized portals**

To address the immense, broadly reported gap between the mental health resources that are actually available and employee perception of their availability, many employers have begun curating their sometimes-disparate portfolios of mental health resources on a single platform that employees can easily navigate to and then navigate out from.

These portals not only serve as a user-friendly, reliable, one-stop shop that allows employees to see all of an organization's well-being resources—they can also guide employees to the right resources based on their individual set of needs. In doing so, they can offer a more personalized, relevant experience that helps employees avoid the cognitive tendency to treat available mental health resources as "not meant for me."

#### **Strengthening measurement practices**

Employers are also leveraging new tools for measuring the complex impact of their mental health strategies—both in terms of their services offered and their progress towards culture change. New comprehensive indices like the Mental Health at Work Index bring the rigor used in tracking traditional business milestones to measure benchmarks in mental health across 10 categories of metrics: mental health strategy; leadership; organizational culture and impact; workforce involvement and engagement; work design and environment; communication, training specific to mental health, mental health resources and benefits; related employment practices; and measuring, monitoring, and reporting.

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Progressive employers have further strengthened their accountability regimes by integrating mental health metrics into their environmental, social and governance (ESG) frameworks, creating a standardized, routinized, and more transparent process for reporting on their mental health commitments.

Equally important as an organization's measurement of its mental health strategies is its method of analyzing the collected data. By designing measurement tools to be sliceable according to different demographics, employers can build a more accurate picture of their mental health impact across their entire employee population.

### Spotlight: The Mental Health at Work Index examines the current state of workforce mental health strategies

Early topline results from the Mental Health at Work Index—developed in partnership by One Mind at Work, Columbia University's Mental Health + Work Design Lab, and corporate ethical standards measurement company Ethisphere—reveal that despite increased attention over the past few years, even committed organizations that are invested in and actively addressing workforce mental health are only at a moderate level of maturity on average **(2.6 out of 5, with 5 representing highly mature programs)**.

A breakdown of maturity level by focus area, on average, suggests that employers have thus far prioritized certain efforts over others:

#### Mental health resources & benefits

3.1

#### Benefits-related employment practices

3.0

#### Leadership support for mental health efforts

2.3

#### Measuring, monitoring & reporting

2.3

#### Workforce involvement & engagement

2.2

Source: One Mind at Work, 2023



## **4. People management**

### **Strengthening Human Capital Management departments**

HR departments are one “solution hiding in plain sight.”<sup>33</sup> An HR or talent management department with a clear, explicit mandate to support the different intersecting dimensions of employee well-being can signal strong organizational commitment to employees. Human capital managers occupy an essential central role to raise awareness of mental health resources, connect workers with support, and educate managers on supporting their teams.

To enhance employee awareness of employer well-being efforts, HR should promote and amplify the voices of senior leaders, managers, and peers throughout the organization consistently. This messaging, which may perhaps feel repetitive, helps employees feel confident that the benefits previously touted are still being offered and are culturally acceptable.

Absent centralized navigational tools for employer-provided resources, HR departments can also serve to triage employees experiencing mental health issues towards the resources that they need and proactively provide information that helps employees use them like any associated costs, how privacy is protected, and how to access them.

### **Manager training at all levels**

Managers are another key touchpoint between employees and their organizations—whose cues can set the tone on mental health for their directs. In fact, they are often the first point of contact for employees experiencing mental health issues, and therefore play a leading role in creating a supportive and safe work environment.

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Regular, ideally mandatory manager trainings can improve communication skills at all levels to help them engage in mental health conversations in their day-to-day management, recognize early signs of mental health issues, as well as prepare for more difficult conversations about appropriate supports and accommodations for employees who are struggling with performance.

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Trainings can help managers further reduce the stigma around mental health in the workplace by encouraging them to model sustainable work behavior. A direct report whose manager sends messages at midnight without context, for instance, may assume that they are expected to respond at midnight as well.

### **Making mental health a KPI**

One way that managers are modeling mental health as a priority in their day-to-day management is by encouraging their teams to leverage Key Performance Indicator (KPI) goals to promote improved well-being—and integrating a practice of checking in regularly on their team’s status against these KPIs alongside traditional, business-oriented ones.

Adopting this trend requires clear framing upfront of the value of setting these KPIs, which are meant to provide managers with feedback about their team’s wellbeing but could implicitly code a difficult week for an employee’s mental well-being as a kind of failure to perform.

One solution to avoid associating mental health with a value judgement has been to use individual or team well-being KPIs that measure the workplace behaviors or job conditions that influence employee well-being. Such KPIs include the employee’s feelings about their work-life balance, or how supported the team felt by the manager.

### **Using pulse surveys to shed a light on employee needs**

Finally, employers are leveraging pulse surveys to better understand what kinds of support their employees prefer, and where they experience challenges to their wellness in the workplace. Distinct from measurements of workplace mental health strategy, these pulse surveys focus less on employees’ engagement with employer-provided mental health resources and instead take a more human-centered approach in seeking to understand employees’ work experience more broadly.

Including diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) teams in the planning and auditing process can help employers craft questions and contextualize responses to focus in on the challenges that specific demographic groups face.

## Toward the future of sustainable workplaces

The confluence of attention, investment, and new ideas in workplace mental health create an opportunity for employers to thoughtfully evaluate their mental health strategies. Stubbornly high mental health needs make seizing this opportunity a strategic imperative.

Employers have made progress in offering mental health benefits and addressing other challenges that fall squarely at the organizational level of challenges. But the challenges that arise from the interaction of the individual and the design of their workplace remain particularly difficult for all employers to address—especially as today's employees continue to re-evaluate and re-define their relationship with work.

Truly moving the needle on employee well-being requires a broader shift towards a healthier culture of work that integrates a regard for all dimensions of employee well-being into the very operations of the workplace. This type of culture change is essential to create a work environment where all employees can access the mental health services they choose and requires supplementing policies with programming and people management tactics.

Of course, culture change is not an easy process, and no one organization has gotten it exactly right. It requires testing, sharing, measuring, and evaluating new ideas—and the right solutions for one company may not be right for another. This report aims to provide a framework for employers to understand where the gaps in current mental health strategies lie, and to evaluate possible solutions to address those gaps so that employers can take advantage of this unique moment to right-size their mental health strategies.

More broadly, this new era of work requires a more holistic understanding of workplace well-being across corporate America. Forward-thinking employers have begun to make a conscientious effort to support employees' emotional needs, including their mental and social well-being, alongside traditionally understood dimensions like physical and financial wellness—and to understand how these needs impact and intersect with their work around diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. Scaling these new ideas and strategies, maturing specific offerings, and evaluating their success will help organizations build towards a future of more inclusive, productive, and sustainable workplaces.

### Endnotes

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## A path to better workplace mental health: reorienting approaches and priorities

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