

Health and well-being at work: a survey of employees

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Background and survey objectives

The Health and Well-being Employee Survey was jointly funded by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and the Cross-Government Health, Work and Well-being Strategy Unit (HWWB). The HWWB is sponsored by five government partners: the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Department of Health (DH), HSE, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government. This report focuses specifically on HWWB's objectives for the research.

In March 2008, Dame Carol Black's review of the health of Britain's working age population was published¹. This review recognised the beneficial impact that work can have on an individual's state of health and that work is generally good for both physical and mental health. The response to Dame Carol Black's review² was published in November 2008 and identified seven key indicators to develop baselines for and measure progress against. The second of the indicators was 'improving the promotion of health and well-being at work', which has several sub-indicators:

- health and well-being initiatives and support;
- flexible working policies;
- stress management standards;
- attendance management (in terms of helping employees back to work or making adjustments to jobs to keep them in work);
- employee engagement.

¹ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/hwwb-working-for-a-healthier-tomorrow.pdf>

² <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/hwwb-improving-health-and-work-changing-lives.pdf>

The survey meets HWWB's objectives for the research, by:

- developing the evidence base around work and health and workplace health initiatives from the employee perspective;
- providing baseline data so that progress on health and well-being at work can be measured and monitored over time.

Research method

The survey used a random probability sample design. Interviews averaging 35 minutes in length were administered in employees' homes by GfK NOP's field force between October and December 2009. In total 2,019 interviews were achieved with paid employees, working in all sectors of the economy.

The survey data are representative of paid employees in Great Britain (GB) aged 16+, meaning that we can draw conclusions from the data about the population of employees in GB³.

Setting the scene

To set the findings in context, this section summarises some key information about the survey respondents.

General health and well-being

- Ninety per cent of respondents said their general health was either very good or fairly good, younger respondents were more likely than older respondents to describe their health in this way.

³ The findings discussed in the report are based on significance testing at a 95 per cent confidence interval.

- Thirty per cent of respondents said their life outside work was not at all stressful, whilst just over four in ten (44 per cent) described it as mildly stressful.
- Respondents' overall well-being was assessed using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS)⁴. Across the sample, the average well-being score was 26 out of 35. Broadly speaking, as many people sat above the average score as sat below it, so there was not a situation in which a few people had exceptionally high or low well-being scores.

Pay and future plans

- Respondents held positive views about pay and benefits; 59 per cent agreed that they were satisfied with the pay and benefits they received in their job, and those in the top income brackets tended towards higher levels of agreement. Public sector respondents and those working in medium or large establishments tended to be most satisfied with their pay and benefits.
- Retention was assessed in terms of whether or not employees had thought about leaving their employer in the past year: 40 per cent of respondents had thought of doing so.
- Thirteen per cent of respondents thought that losing their current job in the next 12 months was very or fairly likely; those working in Manufacturing/Utilities and Transport/Communications were amongst those most likely to feel this was the case.
- Most people intended to retire from paid work between the ages of 60 and 65.

⁴ WEMWBS measures subjective well-being and psychological functioning, see http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/543/1/WRAP_Stewart_Brown_Warwick_Edinburgh.pdf

Sickness and sick pay⁵

- Forty-four per cent of respondents said that they had gone to work in the past 12 months when, in their opinion, they should have taken sick leave, which could be considered evidence of 'presenteeism'. On average, respondents had gone to work on two days in the past 12 months when, in their opinion, they were really too sick to do so.
- Forty-eight per cent of respondents had taken some sick leave in the last 12 months; the average number of days' sick leave across the whole sample was 4.9 days.
- For 65 per cent of all respondents, sick pay was paid at their normal rate of pay during their first seven days of absence, but ten per cent did not know their organisation's policy on sick pay.

Health and well-being at work

Health and well-being initiatives

From a list of twenty support measures incorporating the whole spectrum of initiatives designed to promote worker safety, healthy lifestyles and well-being⁶, those most commonly cited as being provided by organisations in the last 12 months were more than 20 days' holiday (excluding bank holidays) and an employer pension scheme, cited by 84 per cent and 70 per cent of respondents respectively.

Considering only those respondents who were eligible to take up an initiative or benefit, those most commonly used in the last 12 months were⁷: subsidised canteens or restaurants, healthy food choices in vending machines/canteens and employer pension schemes. It is important to remember

⁵ Figures for sickness absence and 'presentee-ism' are based on respondents who working for their organisation for one year or more.

⁶ For a full list of the initiatives and support measures see the full report

⁷ Respondents who mentioned that their organisation offered 'more than 20 days' holiday, excluding bank holidays' were not then asked questions about levels of take up

that not all initiatives and benefits would have been applicable or useful to all employees (e.g. programmes to help people give up smoking, weight management programmes, etc), and, correspondingly, these had lower take up levels.

Flexible working options

Fifty-seven per cent of respondents said their organisation offered at least one flexible working practice⁸, and this was more likely to be the case for respondents working in very large, public sector organisations.

Attendance management

Attendance management was examined in terms of assisting people back to work after illness or injury, or making adjustments to jobs to help people stay in work. Amongst respondents who reported more than five days' continuous sickness absence, around half (48 per cent) had received assistance to return to work, and the most commonly identified measures were reduced working hours or days (20 per cent), access to occupational health measures (19 per cent) and reduced workloads (19 per cent).

Respondents who had experienced more than five days' continuous sick leave were asked whether their organisation had ever made, or offered to make, any adjustments to their job at any point, not just on their return from sick leave. Forty-four per cent of respondents in this group had received or been offered adjustments to their job, and the most common measures were different or reduced working hours (18 per cent) and different duties at work (15 per cent).

⁸ Flexibility was also examined in terms of the practices used by employers to help people back to work after illness and to facilitate their ability to do their job on a day to day basis (see Attendance management).

Stress management

Thirty-two per cent of respondents said that stress management support or advice was provided to employees and/or managers within their organisation. In terms of direct experience, around a third of respondents with a line manager or supervisor (34 per cent) agreed that this person had talked to them about avoiding stress at work, and just under half of line managers themselves (45 per cent) reported that they had received information, help or advice on managing stress amongst their employees.

Employee engagement

At least fifty-nine per cent of respondents strongly agreed or tended to agree with the five statements making up the employee engagement question battery⁹. Agreement was highest, at 69 per cent, for the statement *My organisation inspires me to do the best in my job*. Responses to the five statements were summed and an average score calculated for the whole sample; when scaled up, the overall level of employee engagement was 67 out of 100.

Relationships at work and work culture

Most respondents were positive about their relationships with colleagues, with some of the most positive views related to the help and support received from other colleagues in their organisation. High levels of positive feeling were recorded for relationships with line managers (70 per cent or more returned positive ratings on all but one measure¹⁰). There was, however, some criticism of senior managers, particularly in terms of delivering on promises (47 per cent said they failed to do so).

⁹ For more information about the index please see: <http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/about/improving/engagement/index.aspx>.

¹⁰ On the negatively phrased statement 'your line manager expects you to work too hard', 55 per cent **disagreed** that this was the case.

In terms of organisational culture, respondents were most negative about statements relating to how employees were rewarded and developed, with 39 per cent saying that their organisation failed to reward extra effort made by staff.

Conclusions

This survey has provided baseline evidence of activity, across organisations of all sizes and in all sectors, for the indicator 'Improving the promotion of health and well-being at work' and several of its sub-indicators. There are some clear patterns in the data that show that provision is more prevalent in large organisations, especially those in the public sector and those with trade union presence.

As well as providing data to support the government's commitment to monitoring employee health and well-being at work, the survey has provided evidence that may be of interest to policy makers responsible for the promotion of good work and employee engagement, as illustrated by the recommendations of the Marmot Review¹¹ and Macleod Review¹² respectively.

¹¹<http://www.marmotreview.org/AssetLibrary/pdfs/Reports/FairSocietyHealthyLives.pdf>

¹²<http://www.bis.gov.uk/files/file52215.pdf>

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 985 7. Research Report 751. July 2011).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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