

FOLLOW UP REPORT

How businesses have adapted their response to staff welfare as a result of [the pandemic](#).

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As we are now only too well aware, the COVID19 pandemic has put many pressures on organisations that have never been experienced before. Along with the huge economic pressures that have been felt by businesses around the world, the longer the pandemic has run, the greater the concern has grown surrounding employees' physical and mental well-being.

Clearly, the impact on organisations has differed depending on which sector they operate in, however, whether a business has grown or downsized, there will have been additional stresses put upon their workforces due to the pandemic.

As we have yo-yoed from one lockdown to the next, the stresses and strains may have fluctuated. However, there is no doubt that both mental and physical health have been challenged. Factors have included working from home with workspaces that may not be fit for purpose, fighting for that quiet space whilst often negotiating home schooling, or looking after children who would normally be in nursery. Conversely, there are also those who live alone, who will have had to battle with being isolated from other people, spending days, weeks or months without meaningful human contact.

Back in May 2020, we produced a report that investigated how businesses had adapted to support the welfare of their staff. Overall, we found that the vast majority of businesses had attempted to protect their staff welfare during the pandemic. Whether this was proactively or reactively managed, it seemed that there had been a strong 'human element' to the way that employees have been treated. Both physical and mental welfare had been considered and employers had demonstrated flexibility in circumstances that would have been impossible to foresee and therefore to plan for.

Our report suggested that, moving forwards, businesses had an appetite to implement a new 'norm' in both the flexibility offered and staff welfare that could revolutionise the way that we work. In February 2021, we decided to review the progress made since May 2020, to see if things had continued to progress and to delve deeper into some of the areas we had touched upon in the first report. Nearly 150 business leaders took part in this survey, which has allowed us to publish our second report.

Chris Goulding, Managing Director



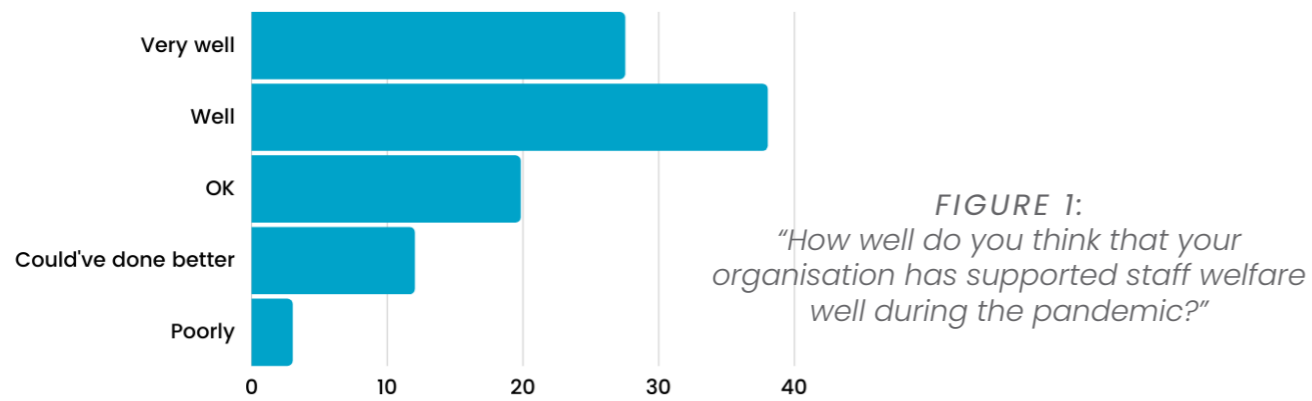
Chris has worked locally within recruitment since the late 1990's. Having spent 18 years with a corporate recruiter, holding a number of Director roles, he made the move to Wade Macdonald two years ago to undertake the role of Managing Director.

During his twenty years' in the industry he has seen huge change in the way that head office functions are both perceived within business and the growing importance of those functions in the way that business decisions are made.

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STAFF WELFARE

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We started by asking whether employees felt that their employers had taken due care of their welfare and mental health during the pandemic. As you will see from the graph 27.5% felt that their businesses had supported them very well, with a further 38% feeling they had been supported well. Just under 20% felt it was OK. However, at the other end there were 12% who believed things could have been better and 3% who thought their employer had been poor. Back in May 2020 we would have seen this as a very positive set of results, **but is it good enough a year into the pandemic with everything we have learned?**

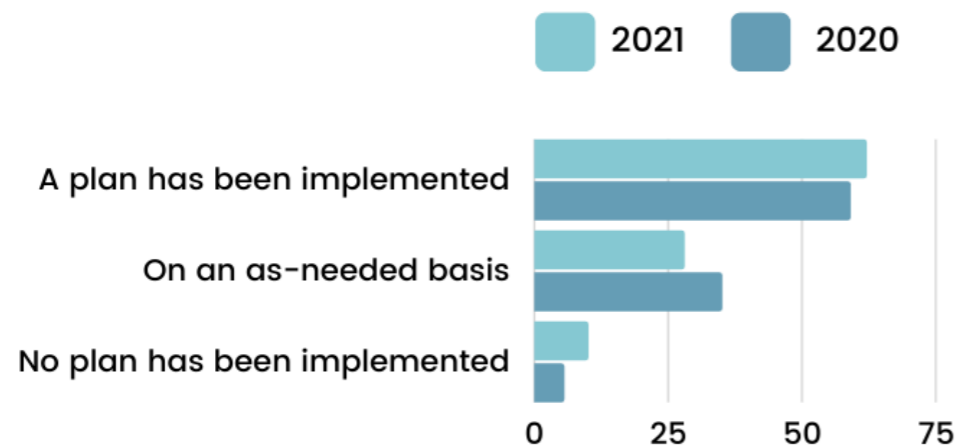
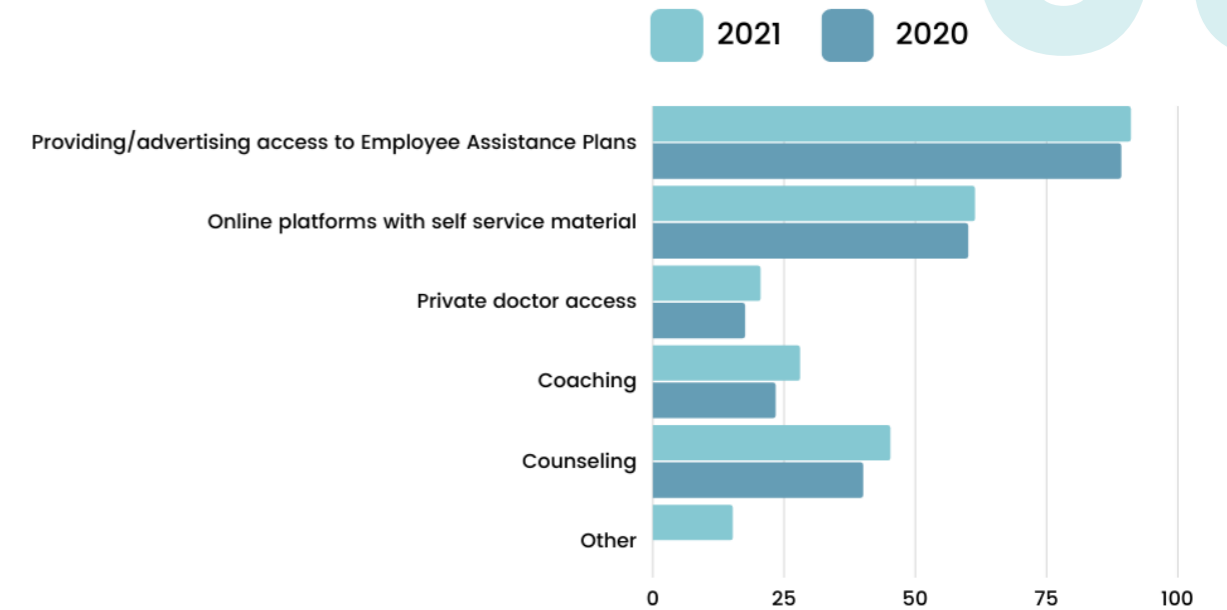


FIGURE 2: Has your business implemented a plan for staff welfare in response to the pandemic?

In May 2020, our perception was that businesses had adapted really well to support their staff. 59% had pro-actively implemented a plan for staff welfare with a further 35% supporting reactively. The results in February 2021 suggest that despite the positive initial response, not enough progress has been made since. We can see that 62% now have a plan implemented, but the other results have actually regressed. 28% reported there was a reactive response when required, but even more surprising, there were 10% of businesses that had nothing in place at all. This may suggest that as businesses adapted to a 'new norm', they may have lost sight of the importance of their staff's welfare and some of the support has actually regressed as the pandemic has gone on longer than anticipated.

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FIGURE 3: "If a plan was implemented, what is provided?"



On a more positive note, we can see that the organisations that are offering welfare support have opened up more tools to their staff than back in May 2020. The graph shows the number of employees with access to EAP's, Online Self Service Platforms, Private Doctors and Coaching have all grown.

When we explored more specific strategies that had been rolled out, we saw that many businesses had become more innovative with different ways to try and support their staff. These include parental support, fun Fridays, online children's parties (including online escape rooms), free zoom fitness classes and virtual social events.

Respondents also mentioned managers being trained on mental health and mental health first aiders being appointed and we take a deeper dive into mental health later in this report. 45% of respondents had access to counselling services if they needed them, which could indicate a positive response to the growing mental health crisis in the workplace, however, **is the response to this growing fast enough?**

We wanted to see whether businesses had yet made long-term commitments to their staff regarding the welfare they would continue to offer post pandemic. 68% announced that their support strategies would continue into the future and be further developed. Again, this was **a slightly disappointing number**, as back in May 2020 our survey had suggested that **76% of businesses** would continue to adopt their strategies long after the pandemic.

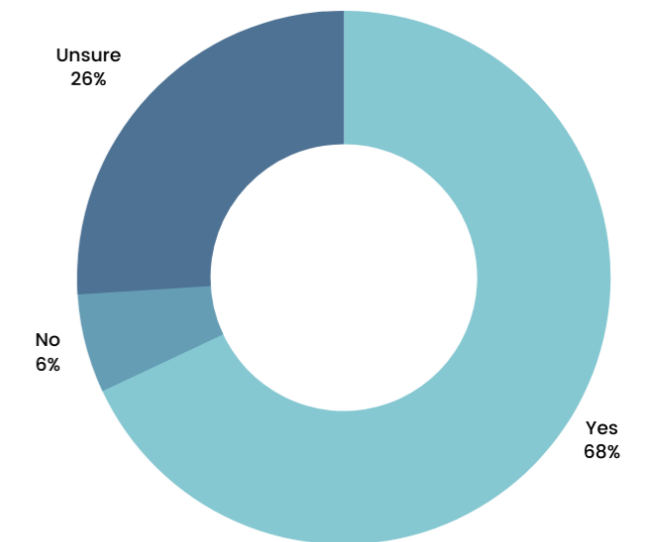


FIGURE 4: "Will welfare support now be offered by your business as standard after the pandemic?"

When we explored what would be offered the answers very much mirrored Graph 3. A number of organisations stated that they would try to tailor their offering around what their staff said would have a positive impact, with a more flexible suite of options including fitness, relaxation classes, food, leisure subscriptions and charity donations.

It was surprising to see **7% of businesses had stated openly that there would be no support after the pandemic.** These businesses may wish review their policies to ensure they do not end up at a competitive disadvantage when either recruiting new staff or in the retention of their current workforce. An expectation is undoubtedly developing that all staff believe their welfare should be taken seriously by their employers and support should be on offer as the norm.

FURLOUGH

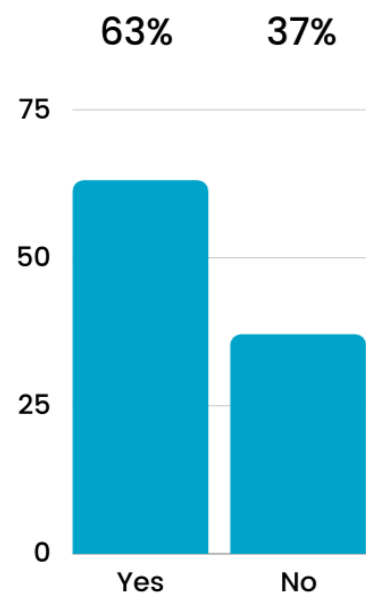


FIGURE 5: "Were staff within your organisation furloughed?"

Although economically most commentators believe that furlough has been a very positive government policy and undoubtedly saved a significant number of jobs, it has also been cited as a contributing factor to the growing mental health crisis within the UK workforce. It has left a number of employees without the normal mental stimulus they may have had, taken away interaction with people outside of their household and left many with uncertainty around their prospects of returning to their jobs.

63% of those that took part in our survey said their employers had utilised the furlough scheme at some point during the pandemic. The vast majority of respondents felt that they had treated furloughed staff well during that period of time, however, over 12% stated that their organisations did not communicate with furloughed staff.

Strategies that were utilised to maintain engagement with furloughed staff included telephone calls with management (65%), team video calls (46%), company newsletters (40%), online training courses (35%) and virtual social events (36%). As you will see from the comparative graph, **these numbers were also stronger than back in May 2020.**

The efforts by businesses to support their furloughed staff is very encouraging and backs up the views of many leaders, who believe **people are the most important asset in a successful business.** Organisations that have been proactive with furloughed staff will undoubtedly have a better chance of retaining them in the short to medium term.

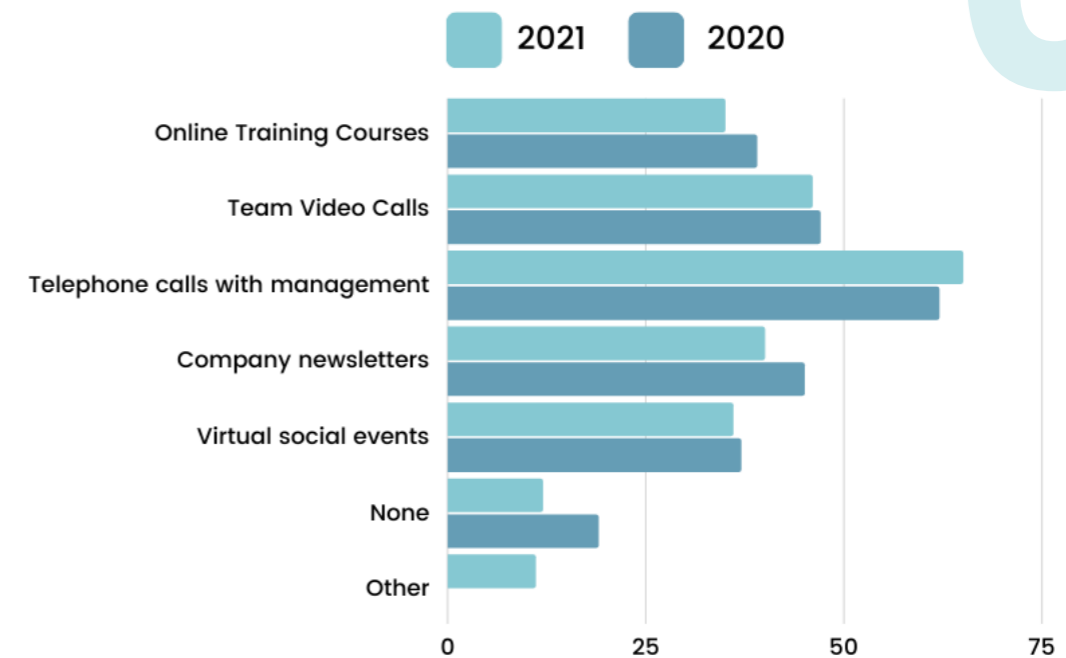


FIGURE 6: "What provisions were put in place to keep staff integrated with the business?"

MENTAL HEALTH

It has been widely reported that the pandemic and the subsequent restrictions designed to prevent its spread, have had a profound impact on our mental health. In a survey earlier in the pandemic, [Mind UK reported](#) that **60% of adults had experienced a negative impact of their mental health since March 2020** and, worryingly, many of these people had never experienced poor mental health in the past. Clearly, there are many reasons for this decline, but now more than ever, there is a growing expectation that businesses should offer support to their employees to combat the problem.

5.5
out of
10

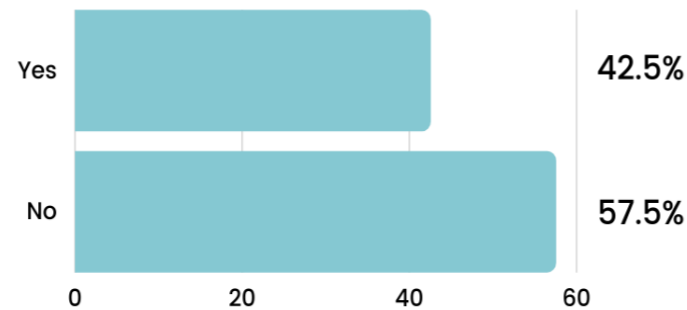
When asked to grade how significant the problems are with mental health in their own organisations, our respondents graded the issue at 5.5 out of 10. This fits in with the Mind UK research and shows it is a very real problem within our local businesses.

FIGURE 7: "On what scale have you experienced a negative impact in the mental well-being of any of your staff during the pandemic?"

As we have already discovered in this report, many of the strategies and tools that organisations have adopted around staff welfare, were aimed at mental health. Graph 12, shows that 42.5% of organisations have already appointed mental health first aiders and/or mental health champions in response to the problem. This is a very positive trend and shows growing recognition of the problem from business

leaders. Although the numbers need to grow quickly, this is a subject that we are hearing our clients talk about far more than pre-pandemic.

FIGURE 8:
"Has your organisation trained or appointed any mental health first aiders and/or mental health champions in response to the changing world?"

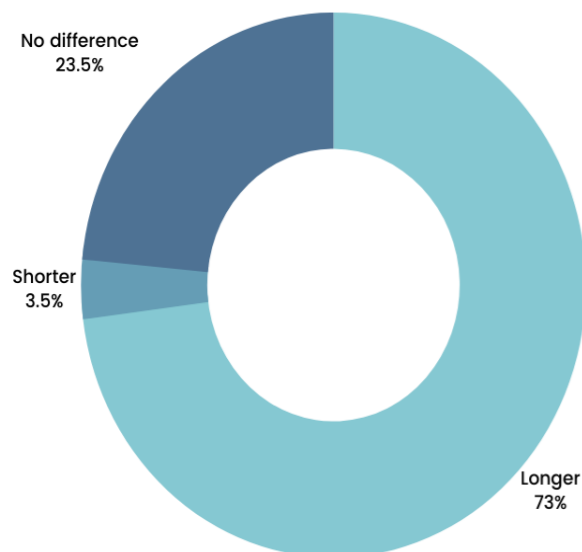


WORKING FROM HOME

We produced a report in September 2020 which focused on [employee expectations post pandemic](#). In that report the message was clear that employees believe that homeworking should become more commonplace post pandemic. In fact we were surprised to see that only 11.5% of people wanted to be fully office based in the future, with 19.5% not wanting to attend the office at all and 69% favouring a hybrid working model (with the vast majority wanting to work more from home than an office).

However, there are some widely reported issues with working from home. One concern centres around whether professionals really are gaining a better work / life balance from working at home and how businesses ensure that there is not a perceived increased pressure of presenteeism. Another surrounds who should foot the bill to ensure that home working spaces are fit for purpose, as this could come at a considerable cost to some organisations.

Our survey showed that 73% of employees have actually been working longer hours from home than they would in an office, with only 3.5% of people feeling it had reduced their hours.



When we dug a little deeper, some felt they were working longer hours because they were enjoying work and wanted to whilst there was less to do outside of work during the lockdown restrictions. Others pointed to the fact that they were **happy doing a few more hours** because they had cut down on their commuting time and still felt it gave them more **work / life balance**.

FIGURE 9: "Do you believe home working has led to longer or shorter working hours?"

However, not all saw it this way. Recent research from a range of different sources has suggested that working from home increases presenteeism for some employees who feel they have to prove that they are working to justify being allowed to work from home and many mentioned this pressure in our survey.

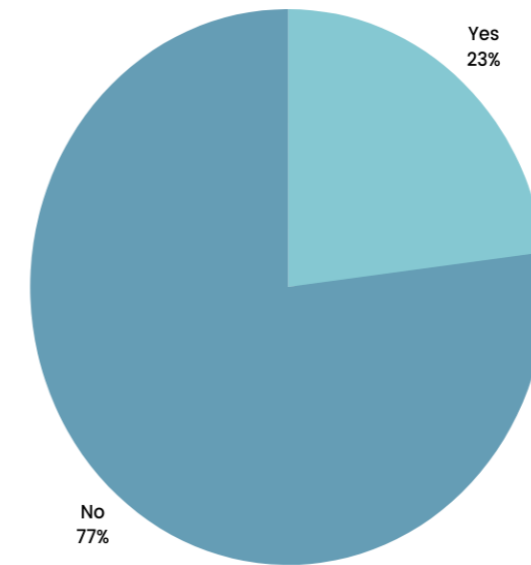


FIGURE 10:
"Do you feel your organisation has put practices in to support workers with presenteeism?"

Furthermore, the responses show that as of February 2021, only 23% of businesses have put processes in place to help with this rising issue. Many of the tactics of those 23% of businesses involved supporting managers to manage more effectively remotely and to communicate to staff that they are judged not on hours, but on productivity. Some organisations have also offered much more flexibility to help with home schooling, insisted that no meetings be booked for a Friday and have a policy of no work beyond 6pm, which is led by the Executive Team.

Other solutions included blocking out calendars for personal time, rolling out home wellness programs, encouraging whole organisations to move away from desks at certain times, setting walking challenges and circulating Mental Health First Aid videos to all.

These are all great initiatives and over the coming months and years we would expect to see greater adoption of such strategies to ensure that the many positives that could come from flexible / home working are not lost.

On and off it has now been a year of working from home for most professionals. Back in March 2020 the move to work from home was very sudden and reactive and many were having to utilise personal laptops, kitchen tables and home broadband to do their work. A year on, we found that **only 37% of organisations have offered financial support towards equipment or amenities to work from home**.

It will be interesting to see how this changes in the future. Although some business leaders may feel staff are saving on commuting costs, or that they are gaining more flexibility or even that it is their choice to work from home so they should foot the bill, it will be interesting to see if employees will simply accept this perspective in the future.

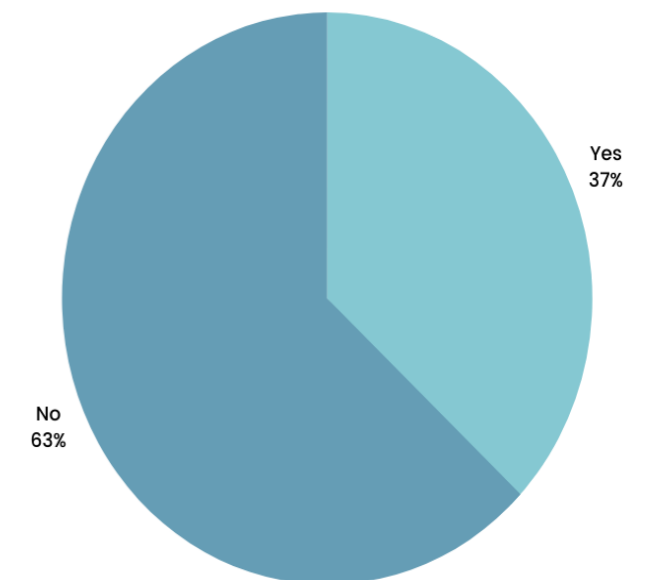


FIGURE 11:
"Has your organisation offered financial support towards home working spaces for staff?"

Of those that had received financial support we saw that this ranged from providing hardware, to contributions towards broadband / phone costs, right through to a fixed amount to spend on making their workstation at home meet their company's health and safety requirements.

THE FUTURE

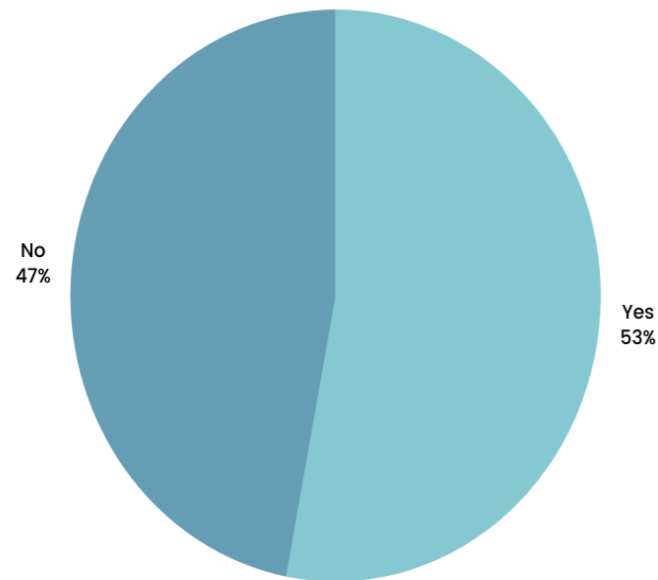


FIGURE 12: "Has your organisation offered financial support towards home working spaces for staff?"

As we are approaching the end of the pandemic and, in theory, a return to the office, we thought it would be interesting to see whether organisations have yet made decisions around their long-term flexible working policy and indeed, where their staff would have to be physically based. Our survey showed that with just a few months to go, only 53% have made this decision so far.

Of those that have made those decisions **all but 7% will be adopting some form of hybrid working policy**, with only 5.5% insisting on being full time in an office. 22.5% will expect their staff in the office more than they can be at home, with 24% offering a 50

/ 50 split. 15% are proposing more time at home than the office, with 31% leaving it completely up to their employees to decide.

For those organisations that have not yet made decisions, they may find pressure to do so sooner rather than later in order to secure the best talent or again to retain it. We are finding that most professionals who are looking for work are asking what the long-term policy of an organisation will be and there is some reticence to accept a new role without this knowledge.

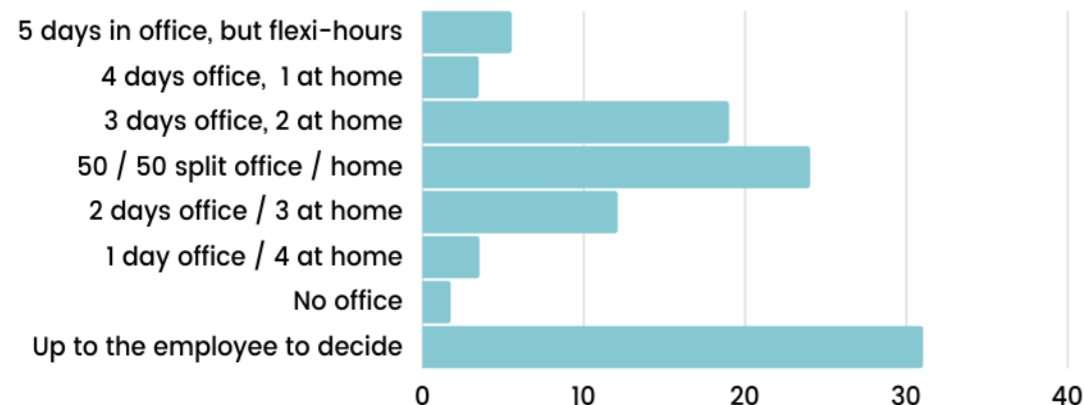


FIGURE 13: "What does the future of flexible working look like in your organisation?"

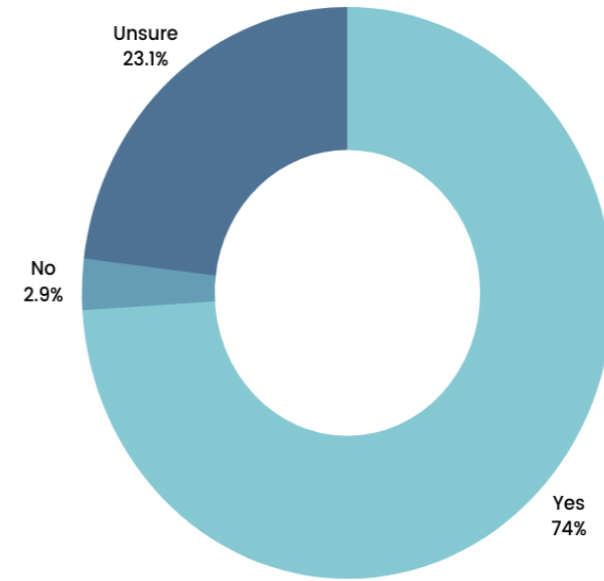


FIGURE 14: "Do you believe that the pandemic will lead to any positive changes to the way we work?"

Although the pandemic has undoubtedly had a devastating impact around the world; millions of deaths, an economic crisis and a huge increase in unemployment, we wanted to see whether professionals could now start to envisage positive change that would come from it in the way that we will work in the future. Can they see any light at the end of the tunnel?

Overwhelmingly the answer was yes, with nearly three quarters of people able to articulate something positive that would come out of this and only 3% unable to see any positives. The majority commented on the change to a hybrid working model as a real positive, with others able to see that

there have been vast improvements in the adoption of technology for business as usual tasks and that the way we will hold meetings and training sessions in the future will be much easier.

"60% of adults had experienced a negative impact of their mental health since March 2020"

CONCLUSIONS

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In May 2020 we were left with an overwhelming feeling of positivity in terms of how business had adapted to better look after the welfare of their employees.

Many organisations are leading the way with well thought out strategies and policies and these should be celebrated. At their best they have innovative practices in place which will help their staff through some very difficult times. We can also see that mental health awareness in the workplace continues to rise, however, it is fair to say there is still some way to go in this area.

When we look at these results on balance, we should still be positive, however, it is clear that for a minority there has been little progress or even in places some regression.

Moving forwards there appears to be a need for organisations to accelerate the formalisation of plans for both their staff welfare and flexible-working policies. This will give their employees the much-needed clarity they deserve and equally importantly assist the business's own talent attraction and management.

Nine months ago we thought it would be interesting to see if the pandemic really would lead to more flexibility in the workplace and it appears we can now be certain that it has played a major part in revolutionising the way that we work. However, in order for "the new norm" to drive better results for a business and make for a more valued employee, organisations still need to tackle the challenges outlined above. Issues such as "presenteeism", the impact on mental health of remote working and the potential increased costs of providing a workspace at home that meets the needs of employers and employees, are but just a few of the areas that businesses need to get right to ensure they better protect the welfare of their most valued asset – their people.

If you have any questions or comments regarding the report, please get in touch with us using the details below, or direct to our Managing Director, Chris Goulding on either:

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