



# MENTAL HEALTH AND THE WORKPLACE

DISCUSSION PAPER:  
EXAMINING THE ROOT CAUSES OF  
MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES  
IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

FUTURE OF WORK SERIES: PAPER 1

100% HUMAN  
AT WORK 

# INTRODUCTION



100% Human at Work is a global collective of businesses seeking to catalyse a 100% Human future of work that serves humanity and the planet. Founded in partnership with The B Team and Virgin Unite, the initiative now counts over 450 organisations as part of the community.

In this series of discussion papers we look at the ways in which work has been and is changing in light of the coronavirus pandemic, trying to understand some of the impacts the changes could have in the long run and assessing ways in which we might rethink the world of work going forward.

In this first paper we will take a look at mental health and the workplace, in particular the root causes that can lead or contribute to issues.

The topic of mental health and the workplace has been gaining prominence for a number of years, with employers beginning to recognise the impact work and the workplace can have on mental wellbeing and increasingly seeking to support employees.

However, there is a lot more to be done. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on mental health and wellbeing as we all spend more time confined to our homes and experience significant uncertainty about the future.

In light of the pandemic, we anticipate employers and governments needing to prioritise employee mental health.

This paper brings together thoughts relating to the impacts of Covid-19 on mental health and wellbeing alongside broader considerations. Our aim is to spark a conversation, and we would love to hear your input and thoughts.

To find out more about the 100% Human at Work initiative, or to share your thoughts, please contact us at [100%human@virginunite.co.uk](mailto:100%human@virginunite.co.uk).

# BACKGROUND



**“One in four people in the world will be affected by mental or neurological disorders at some point in their lives. Around 450 million people currently suffer from such conditions, placing mental disorders among the leading causes of ill-health and disability worldwide.”**

*World Health Organisation [1]*

**In the workplace, three out of five employees in the UK (61%) have experienced mental health issues due to work or where work was a related factor.**

*Business in the Community [2]*

The current crisis will have a profound impact on mental health in both the short and longer term. Employers must help employees manage these impacts, or risk exacerbating problems by their actions.

As we move forward, it is vital that mental wellbeing becomes a key strategic priority for business.

There will also be a key role for governments to play, both via support provisions but also through policy development to address some of the underlying causes.





# IMPACTS OF CORONAVIRUS

The coronavirus crisis has had a significant impact on people's mental and emotional wellbeing, in particular stress and anxiety related to health and job security:

## 1 IN 5

### FEAR JOB LOSS

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In the UK, a Mental Health Foundation report[3] showed one in five people surveyed are concerned about losing their job. One fifth of people surveyed who identified as unemployed had had suicidal thoughts and feelings in the last two weeks. One third of UK adults said they were worried about finances.

## 50%

### NEGATIVE IMPACT

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In the US:

- Nearly half of adults in the United States reported that their mental health had been negatively impacted due to worry and stress over the virus.
- Twenty-six percent of people experiencing job or income loss reported major negative impacts on their mental health.
- People with low incomes have also been more likely to report major negative mental health impacts from worry or stress over coronavirus. [4]

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- There has been a huge surge in demand for mental health services during the pandemic [5]
  - A UK poll showed managing staff anxiety to be the biggest concern for employers in the pandemic. [6]



**In thinking through a response to the challenge of mental wellbeing and work, it is helpful to understand some of the root causes. Whilst many people have underlying conditions that impact their mental and emotional wellbeing, in this paper we will look at the root causes of mental health issues focused on the pandemic and the more general causal factors within the workplace.**

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## THE CURRENT CRISIS

Everyone in the world is impacted by the pandemic. Experts have identified several factors impacting people's mental health and wellbeing, which they will carry with them to the workplace and beyond, and which will require support and consideration.

These include:

- High levels of fear and anxiety linked to physical health, financial health and job security
- Grief and loss
- Isolation, loneliness, and loss of connections
- Strained relationships due to confinement
- Increased caring responsibilities
- Increased levels of domestic abuse
- An increase in substance abuse (both a cause of and response to mental health challenges)
- PTSD [7]

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## OTHER ROOT CAUSES WITHIN THE WORKPLACE

Whilst organisations will need to look at new and more robust ways to support mental wellbeing linked to the impacts of Covid-19, it can also be helpful to understand some of the ways in which work can impact mental health more generally, and consider how to mitigate against this in our workplaces.

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# ROOT CAUSES



# WORKPLACE STRESS



“ Workplace stress is defined by the World Health Organization as ‘the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope’. It can be caused ‘by poor work organization (the way we design jobs and work systems, and the way we manage them), by poor work design (e.g., lack of control over work processes), poor management, unsatisfactory working conditions and lack of support from colleagues and supervisors’. Some factors that cause increased stress at work include ‘workload (both excessive and insufficient work), lack of participation and control in the workplace, monotonous or unpleasant tasks, role ambiguity or conflict, lack of recognition at work, inequity, poor interpersonal relationships, poor working conditions, poor leadership and communication and conflicting home and work demands.’ ” [8]

Indian Journal of Medical Research, Workplace stress: A neglected aspect of mental health wellbeing, October 2017

## IMPACTS AND PREVALENCE

Research shows that the following can be particularly stressful, and if prolonged can have an adverse effect on physical and mental health:

- Excessive job demands
- Low control over work
- Lack of social support
- Imbalance between effort inputted and rewards felt
- Unfair treatment of employees by management.[9]

Work-related stress, depression or anxiety accounted for 44% of work-related ill health and 54% of working days lost in Great Britain in 2018/19 [10], with workload, lack of managerial support and organisational change listed as the primary causative factors.

A recent survey of employee wellness in the UK by Capita showed that a high proportion of workers have experienced stress in their work life in the last 12 months (79%), with around half either considering it normal to feel anxiety and stress at work, considering leaving a job due to stress or knowing a colleague that has been forced to give up work due to stress.[11]





## POOR WORKPLACE RELATIONS



Poor workplace relations and unhealthy work environments can have a serious impact on mental health:

- Research over the past 20 years has associated toxic work environments with increased depression, substance use, and health issues among employees.[12]
- Sexual harassment and bullying, which women and those lower in the hierarchy are more at risk of [13], can cause significant stress and mental health impacts.[14]
- Discrimination against particular groups, eg BAME and LGBT+ employees in the workplace also has a serious impact on mental health.[15]



## LACK OF CONTROL / JOB INSECURITY

- In a 2018 UK-based survey and report produced by Business in the Community, two-thirds of employees said that their mental health and wellbeing was affected by their personal job security and by the state of the economy.[16] Given the impacts of Covid-19, workers around the world will be feeling a lack of job security and extreme levels of concern about the economy and job market.
- Low-skilled workers tend to receive lower pay and have less job security and control over their work patterns than higher-skilled workers. Research has shown that the highest rates of suicide tend to be among workers in lower skilled roles.[17]
- There is also a large body of evidence to show that unemployment is bad for mental health.[18]
- Through the current crisis we have seen an increase in caring responsibilities for many, creating a greater need for control over working arrangements, but equally worries about caring responsibilities affecting job security.
- It is important to consider the impact of access to transport on job security. Greyston Bakery in New York considers transport costs a key barrier to entry to the job market. As public transport has become hazardous to use, an inability to physically get to work may be adding to job insecurity for many.

# FINANCIAL INSECURITY



Business in the Community's 2018 *'Seizing the Momentum'* mental health and the workplace survey and report suggested that:

- Financial concerns have caused three-fifths of working people to experience a negative mental health symptom, with this particularly affecting younger employees.
- Those with the lowest household income are more likely to report a mental health diagnosis: 43% of those earning up to £25,000 a year, 33% of those earning between £25,000 and £70,000, and 25% of those earning more than £70,000.
- Women, younger employees and LGBT+ employees are most likely to feel that they have little or no control over their day-to-day finances.
- The majority of employees do not feel comfortable talking about money issues at work.[19]

Lack of health coverage is a persistent problem in many areas of the world, both in terms of the availability and affordability of services.

High costs of health services and lack of health insurance leads to stress about not being able to pay medical bills - research by KFF in the US found that uninsured non-elderly adults are over twice as likely as privately insured adults to worry about being able to pay costs for normal health care.[20] High costs also mean people are less likely to access services - for example a report by the National Council for Behavioural Health found that 42% of the US population saw cost and poor insurance coverage as the top barriers for accessing mental health care, with one in four Americans having to choose between getting mental health treatment or paying for daily necessities.[21]



## LACK OF ACCESS TO SERVICES

In many countries employees will only be able to access health services through their employer, including mental health services, and employers should consider this responsibility.

Access to paid sick leave also affects many US workers and can prevent people from accessing support – JUST Capital analysis shows that only 30% of lower paid workers employed by private corporations could access paid sick leave before coronavirus.[22]





## LACK OF SUPPORT AND AWARENESS

Perceived and anticipated discrimination about mental health issues can be a significant cause of stress and prevent people getting support [23]:

- In 2019 Capita found that stress related absence was on the rise in the UK, but under half of employees actually reported that the absence was stress related, and even fewer employees felt comfortable telling co-workers they took time off because of mental health issues.[24]
- A 2019 survey by Mental Health America also resulted in similar findings: 55% of respondents said they were afraid to take a day off to tend to their mental health, and people who reported that it was unsafe to discuss their workplace stress in their companies had poor outcomes for employee engagement and wellbeing, including difficulty with sleep, lower confidence in the workplace and lower motivation.[25]

These surveys have also revealed some interesting findings about how ill-equipped workplaces are to support colleagues with mental health difficulties:

- In the Capita survey, around half of respondents did not think their line manager would know what to do if they talked to them about a mental health issue.
- Research by Mind in the UK also found that over half of managers said they would like to do more to improve staff mental wellbeing but that they needed more training and / or guidance, and 46% said they would like to do more but it is not a priority in their organisation.[26]



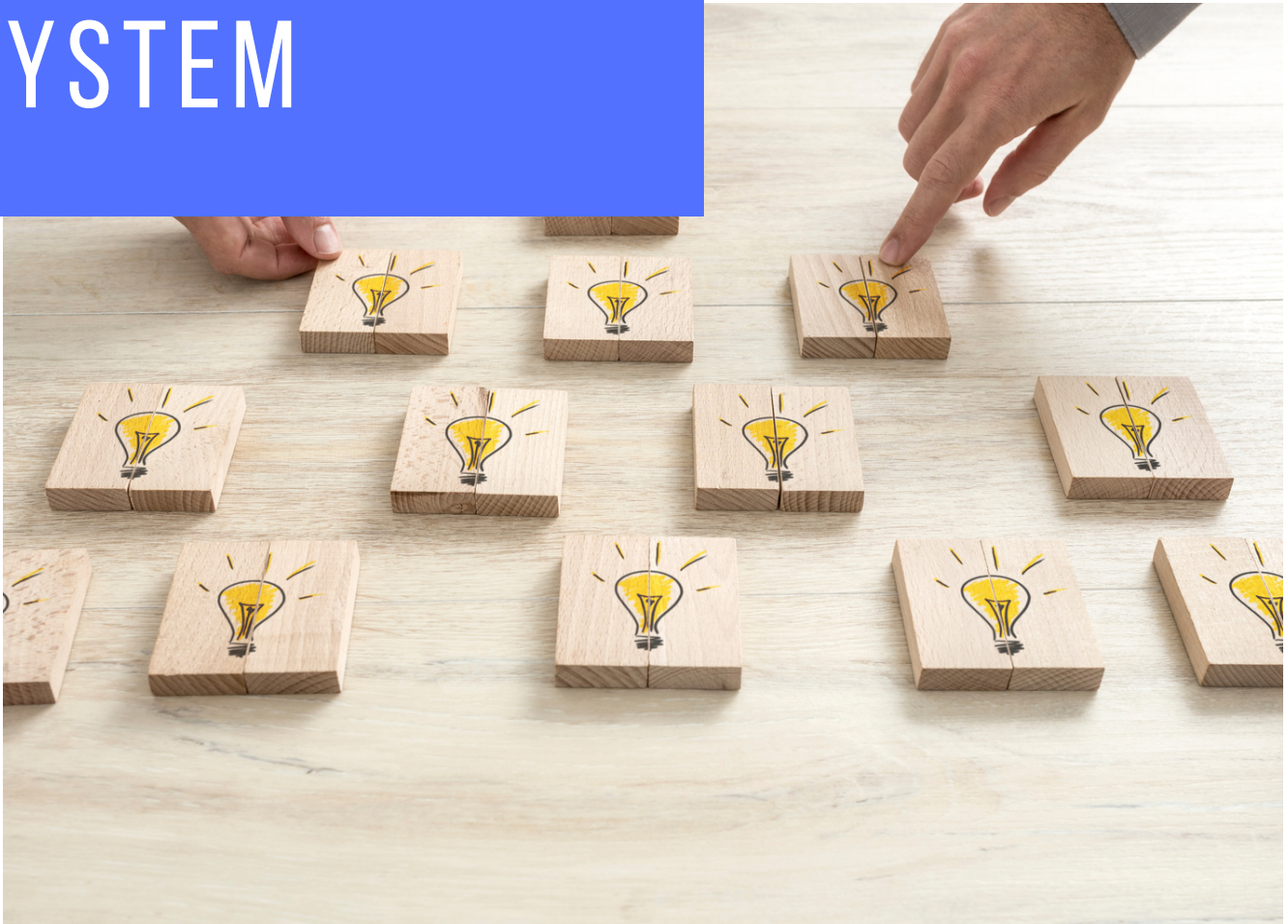
With a sharp increase in remote working, and concerns over safety, there has also been an increase in the use of online communication platforms and tools to monitor productivity, employee health and physical movements.[27]

This increase in surveillance leads to ethical questions, and could have a negative impact on employee mental health.

Work environments that eliminate human agency and rely on constant surveillance can affect employee mental health and damage trust, which is a key component of psychological safety.[28]

Yuval Harari covers some of the bigger questions about surveillance in his article "*Making the right long term choices in the midst of the storm*".[29]

# CHANGING THE SYSTEM



Whilst it is clear that employers and workplaces can significantly influence mental health and wellbeing, including through how they support teams to deal with the exacerbated mental health challenges resulting from Covid-19, there will also be a key role for governments to play.

It is likely that businesses will need the support of governments in implementing and testing new ideas at a policy level that will create the right conditions for better mental health. Here we explore just a few of the ideas that are surfacing.



# WORKER PROTECTIONS



As discussed previously, uncertainty and job insecurity can be important factors impacting mental wellbeing.

During this time of great uncertainty, many businesses have expanded or introduced new worker protections, for example paid sick leave provision, paid carers leave, or paying employees who aren't able to undertake their work from home.[30]

Some governments have also intervened in an unprecedented way [31], although most of the measures are short term.

Continuing to provide greater levels of basic support for workers beyond the immediate crisis, including more comprehensive statutory protections from governments, would reduce anxiety about financial security for significant portions of the workforce, particularly those who don't have access to insurance or savings. [32]

During the crisis workplace safety has also been in the spotlight as a major source of stress and anxiety, with lower paid workers more likely to work on the frontline [33] and many lacking access to PPE.[34] In the medium to long term, governments will need to play a role in ensuring that minimum health and safety standards are in place that enable workers to feel safe.



# FAIR WAGES

We saw earlier in this paper the impact financial insecurity has on mental health, and the disproportionate likelihood of a mental health diagnosis for those from lower income groups. Many companies have increased hourly wages or paid bonuses to frontline workers during this time to acknowledge their contribution. However, very few organisations have committed to this in the longer term, with companies already beginning to wind down their 'hero pay' provision.[35]

In work poverty was a worldwide problem prior to the pandemic.[36] Governments revisiting and enforcing minimum or living wage legislation, and encouraging wages to reflect the cost of living, would go a long way to supporting the high percentage of people in work who worry about their finances to the extent that it impacts their mental health.[37] The Living Wage Foundation has developed global principles for establishing a minimum living wage.[38]

Tackling wage inequality will likely form part of this discussion. A report last year revealed that over the last 40 years CEO compensation grew 940%, while worker wages increased by less than 12%.[39] This can leave those nearer the bottom of the pay scale feeling helpless, and in some cases with only just enough to live on. Many CEOs have taken pay cuts during this time [40], and governments have also been imposing conditions on emergency loans that go some way to levelling inequality [41], but we have yet to see if this will be a longer-term trend and set a precedent for future interventions.

There may also be a role for governments in creating greater equality and protection around maternity and paternity rights, which would give people more flexibility and support and reduce anxiety about finances and job security.



## SUPPORTING THE CASUAL WORKFORCE

The pandemic has made clear our reliance on the casual and gig workforce, and their vulnerability from a job security and mental health perspective. Government and business both need to consider how this part of the workforce can access a more adequate safety net and have better work security [42], and this needs to include governmental reviews of the status of independent workers, to facilitate increased support, rights and security. This will enable people to feel more valued, more in control of their work, and be less at risk financially. The International Labour Organization has set out many recommendations for supporting independent workers.[43]





## UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

Finland has recently published findings from its landmark basic income trial, with the provision of a basic income significantly improving people's feelings of security and wellbeing, linking to better mental health outcomes.[44]

Several countries have introduced a temporary model (at least for one universal payment) to support people during Covid-19, including Singapore, Hong Kong, the US and Japan [45], which could lay the foundation for future thinking. The idea of a "basic employment guarantee" where you'd have the option to be given some work by an employment centre rather than just unemployment insurance, is also in circulation.[46]

Given the fundamental shifts in the world this could be the time to revisit the conversation around UBI and similar models, and consider the benefits for security, mental health and wellbeing. The RSA has previously shared their thoughts on a basic income model.[47]

## FOUR DAY WORKING WEEK

The four-day week is being discussed increasingly seriously, with governments in New Zealand and Canada amongst those contemplating taking it forward at a national level.[48]

Many think it's a good time to introduce a change to working patterns and think a shorter working week could help boost the economy, with people working more productively, getting more time to spend with family and on leisure activities, and benefits for mental health and wellbeing.





## ETHICAL SURVEILLANCE AND USE OF DATA

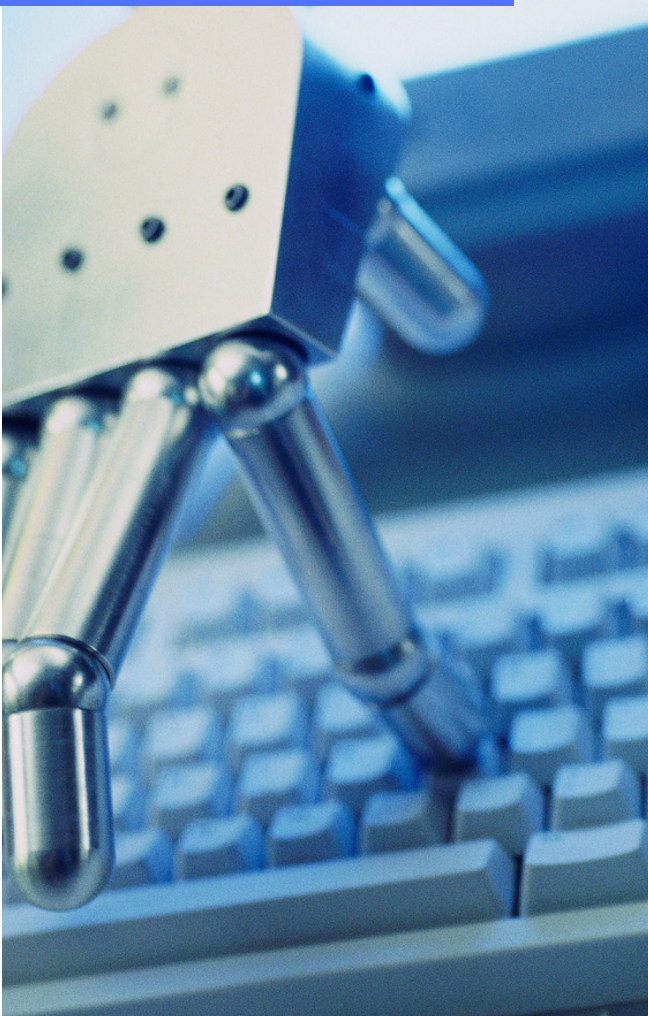
Invasive employee surveillance can be a cause of stress and anxiety, and the last few months have seen a sharp increase in the use of surveillance tools within the workplace - for measuring productivity of remote employees and also tracking employee movements on the grounds of health and safety.[49]

This has sped up the conversation about the

ethical use of technology and data [50], and it has been accepted for a long time that legislation and government guidance must catch-up with practice. [51] Both government and business should be carefully considering the implications and ethics of the surveillance and data collection activity they're undertaking, including the negative impacts this could be having on mental health.



## CONSIDERATE AUTOMATION



Coronavirus is forcing companies to speed up automation, for better and for worse – during the height of the pandemic 41% of bosses in 45 countries were reportedly accelerating automation as they prepare for a post-coronavirus world.[52] This is increasing automation anxiety [53], and some of the recent changes we are seeing are already having a negative impact on outsourced workers in developing countries.[54]

As organisations plan how and where they automate, they should consider how to positively impact jobs using AI and technology [55], focusing on reskilling and redeploying workers as people's roles adapt. This, along with transparent and compassionate communication, will alleviate anxiety in the short term and empower employees to make decisions about their own future in the longer term.

It is widely accepted that governments have a key role to play in equipping workers for the jobs of the future and shifting us to a culture of lifelong learning, for example through incentivising and facilitating reskilling programmes. Businesses sharing skills gaps and collaborating with governments is vital. There are many reports and frameworks on potential routes forward.[56]

# YOUR THOUGHTS



THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO READ THIS DISCUSSION PAPER. WE WOULD LOVE TO HEAR ANY THOUGHTS OR IDEAS YOU HAVE ON THIS SUBJECT.

WE WILL BE ISSUING FURTHER DISCUSSION PAPERS IN THE COMING MONTHS.

IN THE MEANTIME PLEASE FEEL FREE TO GET IN TOUCH WITH THOUGHTS AND FEEDBACK VIA [100%HUMAN@VIRGINUNITE.CO.UK](mailto:100%HUMAN@VIRGINUNITE.CO.UK).

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