

Wellness at work in changing times

A study of employee wellness policies
at small and medium sized
companies in the UK



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Why read this report

This report:

- ✓ Summarises the current state of workplace wellness
- ✓ Reveals peers' approach to wellness
- ✓ Outlines key considerations when designing wellness initiatives

Wellness is high on the agenda at UK firms. Every year brings stronger evidence of the relationship between employee wellness and company performance. Yet creating effective wellness programmes is not easy. This report aims to help human-resource professionals at small- and medium-sized UK companies devise effective programmes improving the mental and emotional wellness of their employees, at reasonable cost, while tracking results.

Yogapp, a London tech platform for the yoga community, started hearing from our customers that mental stress was a key concern—more so even than physical stress. We were keen to understand this better, and conducted a survey of HR managers at small- and medium-sized businesses to explore how they viewed wellness and the challenges they face in promoting it among employees. The survey, conducted from May to June 2020, generated responses from nearly 60 companies across the United Kingdom. Companies ranged from fewer than 100 employees to more than 5,000. A total 94.9% of respondents said their organisations could benefit from wellness programmes.

Importance of wellness



HR professionals awarded wellness 4.9 out of 5 stars in terms of importance to the success of a company.

Key findings of the report

This report summarises our findings and combines it with related external research. It is aimed at small- and medium-sized companies' human-resources professionals in the UK. It examines wellbeing in terms of two components: mental and physical.

Definitions of terms

Some definitions of terms. People who enjoy mental wellbeing have a sense of purpose and do not feel excessive stress or anxiety causing poor sleep or eating patterns. They may enjoy support mechanisms including counselling and other tools, such as interactive apps, empowering them to manage mental distress. Physical wellbeing is, intuitively, the absence of serious impediments to health. Company wellbeing initiatives are programmes aimed at helping employees achieve and maintain both types of wellbeing through any combination of physical exercise, mindfulness and focus on breathing or counselling.

Key findings from our study include:



Mental stress and anxiety are the top two challenges faced by employees in the UK.



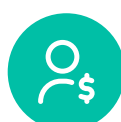
A majority of HR departments try to quantify wellness efforts.



Budget is the biggest inhibitor to wellness programmes.



That is followed by lack of space and time. Wellness initiatives tailored to these constraints are likely to be effective.



Survey respondents overwhelmingly required evidence of employee buy-in for wellness programmes, rating this of equal importance to impact on the bottom line.

The Yogapp survey revealed wellness to be a clear concern among HR decision makers. Respondents awarded wellness 4.9 out of 5 stars in terms of importance to the success of a company. All respondents reported both anxiety and mental stress as key challenges. In fact, achieving better mental and emotional health among employees was identified as the reason firms pursued wellness initiatives, followed closely by a desire to boost team morale. (Improving productivity ranked third.)

Mental-wellness landscape in UK companies

The reason for heightened focus on wellness is simple: failure to achieve it hurts company productivity. Professional-services firm Deloitte found that one in six workers experience a mental-health issue at some time, and that stress is likely responsible for nearly half of working days lost in Britain due to health issues.¹ Meantime, UK government agency Health and Safety Executive (HSE) sees an even starker trend. It published a report last year stating that anxiety or depression caused 54% of all working days lost due to ill health and 44% of all work-related health cases.²

In addition to achieving optimal mental health among employees, Yogapp's survey revealed that companies are most likely to seek improvement in productivity, morale and to minimise sick days.

Anxiety or depression caused...

54%

of all working days lost due to ill health

44%

and 44% of all work-related health cases

Health and Safety Executive, (October 2019) *Work-related stress, anxiety or depression statistics in Great Britain, 2019*

The trend appears to be worsening. The HSE says the rate of anxiety, stress and depression reported by employees has grown in recent years.³ Accompanying this is a growing trend in days lost.⁴ And consider staff turnover and presenteeism, in which employees work despite suffering health problems. *Thriving at*



¹ Deloitte LLP. (January 2020) *Mental health and employers/Refreshing the case for investment*, p1. <https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/consulting/articles/mental-health-and-employers-refreshing-the-case-for-investment.html>

² Health and Safety Executive. (October 2019) *Work-related stress, anxiety or depression statistics in Great Britain, 2019*, p8.

³ *ibid.*, p3

⁴ *ibid.*, p5

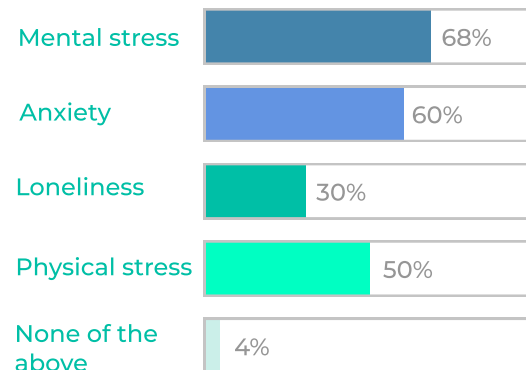
Mental-wellness landscape in UK companies

Work, an independent 2017 review of mental health and employers commissioned by the UK government, found that poor mental health every year cost employers the equivalent of between £1,205 and £1,560 per employee, due to absenteeism, presenteeism and turnover.⁵ Meanwhile, Deloitte research published this year identifies a significant rise in presenteeism and turnover compared to its data published in 2017. Average public-sector costs per employee are £1,716, slightly higher than those in the private sector of £1,652, it found.⁶ And annual per-employee costs of mental health in the finance, insurance and real estate industries are £3,300, the highest of any industry, according to Deloitte.⁷

Cost is not always measured purely in pounds sterling. When an employee cannot attend work due to stress, productivity obviously suffers and stress shifts to colleagues who must cover missed work. Presenteeism is little better: an employee may be physically present at work but productivity often ebbs.

Yogapp survey of HR officials 2020

Challenges for employees



Yogapp Ltd. (May-June 2020) *Wellness @ Work Survey*

Cost can assume even more nebulous—but no less troublesome—form. HRZone magazine describes “innovation stress” as arising when not enough resource is available to fuel the strong need for workplace creativity, resulting in poorly focussed ideas, low morale and overpromising by team members who feel detached from a core mission.⁸

Decision makers contend with the perception that wellness must entail high cost. Two thirds of our survey respondents described tight budgets as barriers to wellness—ahead of space and time constraints and lack of interest from management. But the firms do what they can. Nearly 80% of respondents spend money on wellness initiatives. A third—the largest portion—spend below £5000 a year. Investment is split roughly equally between mental/emotional wellness and physical wellness.

⁵ Dennis Stevenson and Paul Farmer. (October 2017) *Thriving at Work*. p24.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/thriving-at-work-a-review-of-mental-health-and-employers>

⁶ Deloitte LLP. (January 2020) *Mental health and employers/Refreshing the case for investment*, p9

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ HRZone. (19 April 2019) *Is your team suffering from innovation stress?*
<https://www.hrzone.com/perform/people/is-your-team-suffering-from-innovation-stress>

The challenge of promoting wellness

Despite the strong financial and productivity rationales for promoting wellness, HR departments struggle to achieve buy-in due to several obstacles.

Budget

Respondents to Yogapp's survey said securing a budget was the biggest challenge to promoting wellness. This is particularly acute in the wake of covid.

Measurability

Justifying wellness budget is made easier by quantifiable evidence of benefits such as reduced absenteeism and increased productivity. But data that is collected is often not directly relevant to the bottom line.

Accessibility

Forty-four percent of our survey respondents reported lacking space required for mindfulness or physical exercise. Memberships at external gyms are an alternative, but have limited applicability in terms of wellness. Covid will also have impact, as suggested by research external to our own survey. According to a study by Skillcast and YouGov, 68% of British employees wish to continue working from home after lockdown.⁹ This creates challenges (but opportunities too) for diversified wellness programmes.

Buy-in

Self-consciousness and inertia hold many employees back from the first steps towards greater wellness. Over 60% of HR respondents to our survey needed quantifiable evidence of employee interest in wellness initiatives to secure budgets.

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of British employees wish to continue working from home after lockdown, according to Skillcast and YouGov¹⁰

44%

of our survey respondents reported lacking space required for mindfulness or physical exercise

⁹ Skillcast. (2020) *Working from Home*. <https://www.skillcast.com/blog/working-from-home-survey-findings>

¹⁰ *ibid*.

Recommendations

A wellness programme yielding meaningful results will feature strategies for grappling with many challenges. Solutions must address mental and emotional wellness affordably, be accessible virtually and be measurable.



Data collection

The business case for greater spending on wellness should include evidence that earlier investment bore fruit. This requires tools to track that employees are attending sessions as well as comparing their emotional and physical states of wellbeing before, during and after the full course. Such tools must be easy (and even fun) for employees and HR departments to use, cheering the employee on and helping HR departments quantify impact of spend—all while ensuring confidentiality under GDPR regulations.



Exercise and mental health

Modern approaches to wellness focus increasingly on mindfulness and its demonstrated effectivity in mitigating anxiety and other mental challenges. Techniques for improving health and mindfulness through meditation and physical exercise are rapidly attracting the interest of scientists in the Western world and should take priority in a wellness programme. Holistic exercise techniques that involve both body and mind can be effective in dramatically promoting mental health. A study published in the *Occupational Medicine* journal compared self-reported psychological well-being, stress and back pain among a group of study participants that practiced yoga with a group that did not. It found that the yoga group reported feeling better psychological well-being than the other group, as well as less back pain and significantly less stress. To be effective, mindfulness should become part of daily life, so a wellness programme ideally promotes practice even away from work.

Encouraging uptake



Online wellness activities are an attractive option for employees reluctant, due to self-consciousness, to participate in public. And staffers merely keen to participate away from the office may enjoy group sessions in their home community. Wellness tools that present the user with a variety of exercise options are more likely to help overcome procrastination. And being able to demonstrate to senior management that employees are engaged is a critical step to securing budget.

¹¹ Occupational Medicine. (25 September 2012) *Yoga for reducing perceived stress and back pain at work*, p1. Available here: <https://academic.oup.com/occmed/article/62/8/606/1441276>

Recommendations



Geographic flexibility

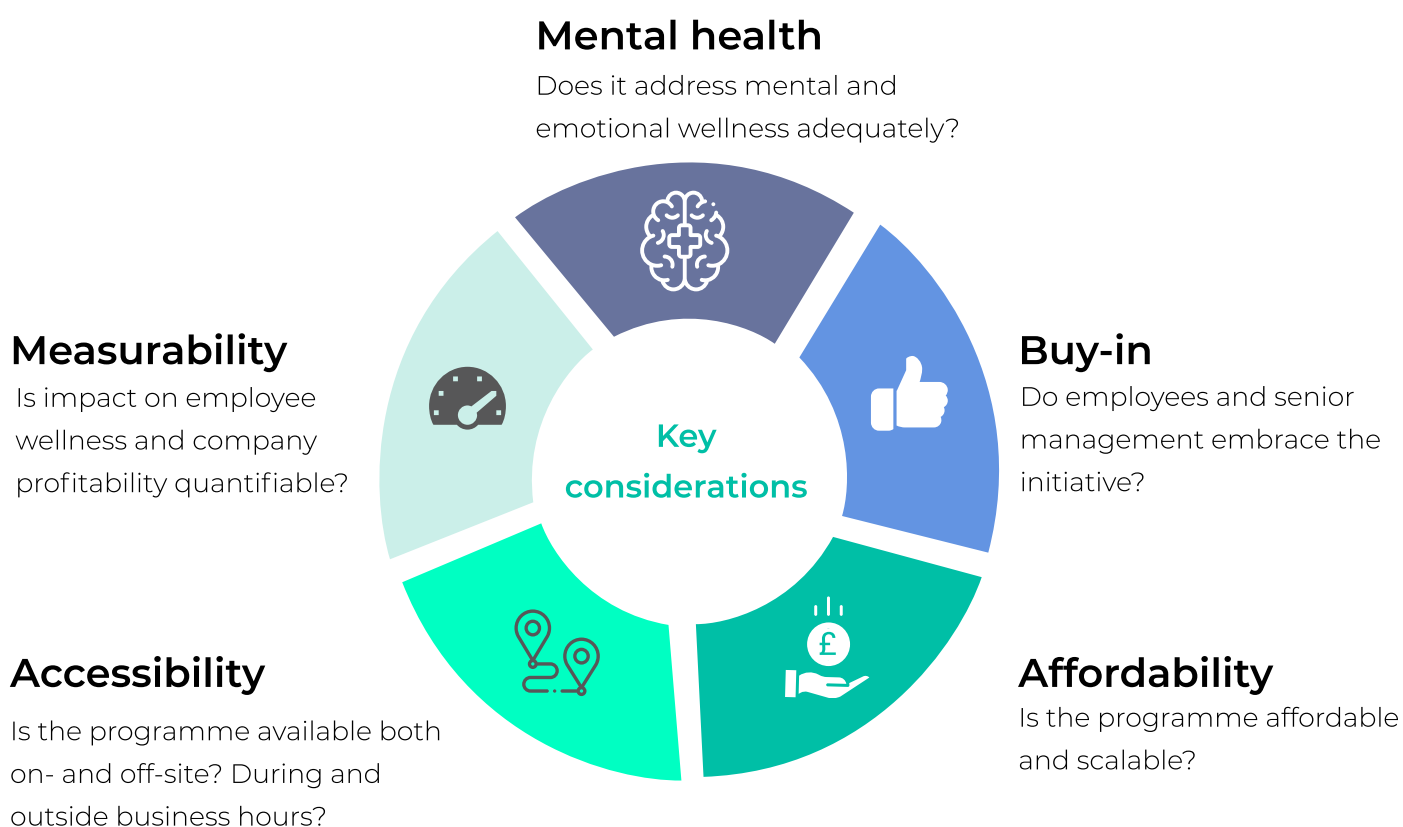
Wellness activities involving physical exertion should include amenities such as changing rooms and showers—during lockdown not a concern but one that will be once employees start venturing back into society. Subsidising approved activities at external wellness facilities near home addresses this concern while offering added benefits such as enabling employees to be active outside normal office hours.



Affordability

In light of survey respondents' emphasis on budget as a main consideration in designing wellness initiatives, any solution must be affordable. One strategy is to avoid paying costs hidden within typical fitness programmes, for example studio or gym rent or equipment maintenance costs. HR departments can also reduce wellness cost by paying strictly for what employees use. Fitness memberships that go unused are an obvious waste of money.

Key considerations when designing a wellness programme



Yoga: a possible solution?

All exercise performed within moderation contributes to mental wellbeing, but exercises that combine physical exertion with meditative practice are particularly suited.

Yoga improved...

Mental health

86.2%

Stress

82.6%

BMJ Open. (12 January 2020) *Yoga practice in the UK: a cross-sectional survey of motivation, health benefits and behaviours*

A recent study by British medical journal BMJ Open of more than 2,400 survey participants undergoing yoga practice found that a large majority felt yoga had improved their mental health (86.2%) and stress levels (82.6%).¹² Nearly 70% reported lifestyle changes they attributed to yoga practice; 57.4% said their sleep improved.¹³ Benefits were not strictly psychological: participants also reported improved physical health (88%), muscular strength (87.1%) and flexibility (91.6%).¹⁴

About Yogapp:

Yogapp helps companies achieve mental wellness through yoga. We support human-resource departments by identifying employees' individual wellness needs via brief surveys. We then introduce experienced, motivated yoga teachers who tailor programmes around employees, both online and (before lockdown) in person. We manage class schedules and payment. Yogapp is also developing an online platform to automate this process and track attendance, progress and feedback, providing HR teams anonymised, GDPR-compliant data to strengthen the case for future budget. Email us to stay in touch!



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¹² BMJ Open. (12 January 2020) *Yoga practice in the UK: a cross-sectional survey of motivation, health benefits and behaviours*. <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/10/1/e031848>

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*