



# HEALTH AND WELL-BEING AT WORK



The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The not-for-profit organisation champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 145,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

Public sector

# Health and Well-being at Work

## Contents

Overall summary of findings	2
Public sector summary	3
Key challenges for HR	6

## 1 Overall summary of findings

The findings of the CIPD's 2018 *Health and Well-being at Work* survey, conducted in partnership with Simplyhealth, show that overall organisations vary considerably in how proactive they are in promoting employee well-being. A substantial proportion have a standalone well-being strategy and take a fairly holistic approach to well-being. Just over half agree that employee well-being is on senior leaders' agendas and just under half that line managers are bought in to the importance of well-being. Most organisations, however, take a reactive, rather than proactive, approach to health and well-being. They are more likely to act flexibly on an ad hoc basis, according to employee need, than have a formal strategy or plan.

Average absence levels have increased slightly compared with our 2016 survey, from 6.3 days per employee per year to 6.6 days. Minor illness remains the most common cause of short-term absence, while mental ill health, musculoskeletal injuries (including back pain), stress and acute medical conditions are the most common causes of long-term absence, as in previous years. This year, however, more organisations include mental ill health among their most common causes of short- and long-term absence. More than half (55%) of organisations report that reported mental health conditions have increased over the last 12 months. 'Presenteeism' (working when unwell) and 'leaveism' (using allocated time off, such as annual leave, to work or if unwell, or working outside contracted hours) are also common. Most organisations use a combination of methods to manage absence and promote attendance.

The survey reveals mixed results in relation to managing mental health and stress at work. Of concern is the increase in the significance of mental ill health as a cause of sickness absence: over a fifth now report that mental ill health is the *primary* cause of long-term absence (22% of organisations compared with 13% in 2016). Most are taking some action to identify and reduce stress in the workplace and manage mental health, and this year we have seen an increase in the proportion that are increasing awareness of mental health issues across the workforce, providing training aimed at building personal resilience and offering employee assistance programmes. Nevertheless, 29% of those who include stress among their top three causes of absence are not taking any steps to address it and just half of respondents agree that their organisation encourages openness about mental health, is effective at supporting people with mental ill health and actively promotes good mental well-being.

Our findings highlight some of the key threats to well-being in the UK workforce, particularly the increase in mental ill health, stress, 'presenteeism' and 'leaveism', as well as potential risks to well-being as a result of technological advances, in particular the 'always-on' culture. We find that while some organisations are making considerable efforts to promote employee well-being and create healthy working environments, in others employee well-being appears to be low on the agenda. Our findings suggest that many would benefit from a more strategic and integrated approach to attendance and well-being, underpinned by the support of organisational leaders and managers.

## 2 Public sector summary

This summary examines findings from the CIPD's 2018 *Health and Well-being at Work* survey for a fuller understanding of the public sector's approach to managing absence and employee health and well-being, and the challenges it faces.

### **The public sector tends to take a proactive approach to well-being**

The public sector takes a more strategic and integrated approach to well-being than the private sector, although there is still definite room for improvement.

For example, 61% have a standalone well-being strategy in support of their wider organisation strategy (compared with 36% of the private sector), 68% agree that employee well-being is on senior leaders' agendas (51% of the private sector) and 55% that line managers are bought in to the importance of well-being (44% of the private sector)..

### **Well-being activity is most likely to focus on mental and physical health**

Many public sector organisations try to implement a holistic approach to health and well-being. In a sizeable majority of public sector organisations, health and well-being activity is designed to promote good mental (82%) and physical health (74%). Most report it is also designed to promote good work, such as job design and work-life balance (65%), good lifestyle choices (64%), collective social relationships (60%), values/principles (58%) and personal growth (55%). Just a third, however, report it is designed to promote financial well-being.

### **The public sector takes a more strategic approach to well-being investments than the private sector**

While two-thirds of the public sector report that decisions to purchase well-being benefits are commonly influenced by budget constraints, they are considerably more likely than the private sector to report that managing identified health issues in the workforce (56% compared with 39% of the private sector) and alignment with the organisation's health and well-being strategy (53% compared with 33% of the private sector) are also important factors in their decisions.

**Organisations and employees profit from a strategic and integrated approach to well-being**

The most common recognised achievement of health and well-being activity is better morale and engagement (43%) followed by a healthier and more inclusive culture (39%), very similar findings to those of the private sector. A third of the public sector report well-being activity has lowered their sickness absence level, a marginally higher level than private sector organisations, while one in six report it has resulted in improved productivity (compared with one in five in the private sector). These figures were all higher in public sector organisations that have a standalone well-being strategy in support of their wider organisation strategy, where senior managers have well-being on their agenda and where line managers are bought in to the importance of well-being.

### **Public sector organisations are active in managing disability and long-term health conditions, but most experience challenges**

The vast majority of public sector organisations have a supportive framework in place for recruiting (84%), managing (84%) and retaining (73%) people with a disability and/or a long-term health condition. These findings compare more favourably than those of private sector organisations, where just half have supportive frameworks in place for recruiting and/or retaining people with these conditions.

However, most public sector organisations report they experience challenges in managing people with these conditions, most commonly developing line manager knowledge and confidence (70%) and developing an understanding about making reasonable adjustments (63%).

The public sector is more likely than the private or non-profit sectors to have made use of external schemes/support such as Access to Work (59% of public sector organisations have used compared with 19% of private sector and 48% of non-profit organisations) and Disability Confident (35% of public sector organisations compared with 4% of private sector and 17% of non-profit organisations).

### **No change in public sector absence levels**

On average, public sector employees had 8.5 days of absence over the previous year, showing no change from our findings in the 2016 survey. Absence rates remain considerably higher in the public sector than in private sector services (5.6 days per employee), manufacturing and production (6.2 days per employee) or the non-profit sector (7.3 days per employee).

### **More absence due to mental ill health**

As in previous years, minor illness remains by far the most common cause of short-term absence for public sector organisations, as is the case for all sectors.

However, it is notable that stress ranks top among public sector organisations' top three causes of long-term absence (71% compared with 45% of private sector services and 33% of manufacturing and production organisations). Workload/volume of work remains by far the most common cause of stress in the public sector (66% include it in the top three causes), followed by management style (40%), considerable organisational change/restructuring (34%), non-work relationships/family (26%) and relationships at work (24%).

The proportion of public sector organisations including mental ill health among their top causes of absence has also increased. While this increase has also been observed in the private and non-profit sector, absence due to mental ill health (as well as stress) remains more common in the public sector. Moreover, two-thirds (67%) of public sector organisations report an increase in the number of reported common mental health conditions in their organisation over the last year (compared with 51% of the private sector). The public sector is also more likely to report that stress-related absence has increased (48% compared with 34% of the private sector).

The greater prevalence of stress and mental ill health issues in the public sector is hard to pin down to one cause. These trends may reflect differences in the nature of work across sectors and the high level of public sector front-line roles, the demographics of employees, budgetary constraints and/or sectoral differences in organisational awareness of stress and mental health issues.

### **More organisations are increasing awareness of mental health issues**

Most public sector organisations are taking a range of actions to manage employee mental health at work. This year more organisations are increasing awareness of mental health issues across the workforce (72%, up from 59% last year). Public sector respondents are more likely than their private sector counterparts to agree that their organisation actively promotes good mental well-being (64% compared with 39% of the private sector). Nevertheless, in much of the public sector (as in other sectors) managers lack the competence and confidence to identify and manage mental ill health.

### **Slightly more organisations are taking steps to reduce and identify stress**

Four-fifths of public sector organisations are taking steps to identify and reduce stress in the workplace, a small increase on previous years (2018: 81%; 2016: 78%; 2015: 68%). This compares with 63% of private sector organisations who say their organisation is taking steps in the 2018 survey.

### **The public sector is more proactive in managing absence and promoting attendance**

Public sector organisations use a wider range of methods to manage absence compared with the private sector. Methods that focus on monitoring and deterring absence are most common (including return-to-work interviews, trigger mechanisms to review attendance and disciplinary procedures for unacceptable absence) along with providing leave for family circumstances and changes to working patterns or environments. In particular, public sector organisations are more likely to offer a range of supportive measures (including employee assistance programmes, occupational health involvement, risk assessments to aid return to work and stress counselling). They are also twice as likely as their private sector counterparts to report they manage absence proactively through an organisational focus on health and well-being. The public sector is less likely than the private sector to restrict sick pay or offer private medical insurance.

### **More organisations provide line managers with tailored support**

Line managers have responsibility for managing short-term absence in four-fifths (79%) of public sector organisations and long-term in three-fifths (63%). Line managers in the private sector, meanwhile, have primary responsible for managing short-term absence in three-fifths of organisations and long-term absence in two-fifths of organisations – showing that public sector line managers tend to carry a greater responsibility for managing absence than their private sector counterparts.

Two-thirds of public sector organisations train managers in absence-handling but less than half train managers to support staff with mental ill health, disability or long-term health conditions. More positive findings this year show a considerable increase in the proportion of public sector organisations providing line managers with tailored support for managing both short- and long-term absence (59% for short-term absence, up from 36% last year; 70% for long-term, up from 43% last year).

### **‘Presenteeism’ and ‘leaveism’ are common**

The vast majority of public sector organisations have observed ‘presenteeism’ in their organisation over the last year and nearly a third report it has increased over this period. ‘Leaveism’ is also commonplace, with three-fifths reporting that employees work outside contracted hours to get work done and two-fifths reporting that employees use allocated time off (for example holiday) to work or when they are unwell. Just over a fifth of public sector organisations have taken steps over the last year to address these issues.

### **Advances in technology have a more positive than negative impact on well-being**

Nearly half of public sector organisations believe that advances in technology have a more positive than negative impact on employee well-being, largely through facilitating flexible working, helping employees have more control over their work or working pattern and reducing commute times/costs for staff that work from home. Overall, a quarter of respondents believe the impact is more negative than positive, but a tiny minority (2%) report that technology has no adverse effects on well-being. An inability to switch off out of hours and the stress caused by technology failure are the most common hazards.

## 3 Key challenges for HR

As we've found in previous years, public sector organisations are more proactive than their private sector counterparts when it comes to promoting health and well-being and managing attendance. Yet absence levels remain higher in this sector, and issues such as stress, mental ill health, 'presenteeism' and 'leaveism' are particularly widespread. Our findings highlight several key challenges for HR going forward.

### **Identify and tackle the root causes of ill health**

Recent CIPD research has found that the public sector workforce is particularly likely to feel under excessive pressure at work.<sup>1</sup> Employees in the public sector (48%) are significantly more likely than employees in the private sector (38%) to say that they are under excessive pressure at work at least once a week. These findings raise concerns that this pressure is contributing to increased mental health issues, stress-related absence (which is most commonly attributed to workloads), 'presenteeism' and 'leaveism'.

Moreover, recent CIPD research shows that public sector employees are more likely than those in the private sector to experience anxiety or depression as a result of work and more generally to see a more negative impact of their work on their mental health.<sup>2</sup>

Advances in technology may also be contributing to these unhealthy trends as the boundaries between work and home life are becoming increasingly blurred, resulting in an inability to switch off out of work hours.

The majority of organisations have a well-established range of approaches they use to manage sickness absence, which is good, but our findings show that a focus on measuring and managing absence alone is not enough to inform an organisation's approach to encouraging a healthy working environment.

HR needs to develop a solid, evidence-based understanding of the causes of absence and unhealthy practices such as 'presenteeism' and 'leaveism' and other factors that could adversely affect employee well-being. Unless well-being activity addresses the underlying issues affecting people's behaviour, efforts to support employees and improve health and well-being will be short-lived.

### **Build a more robust framework to promote good mental health**

It's clear we have some way to go before the majority of workplaces achieve parity of esteem in the attention that good mental health receives compared with physical health, and the confidence and openness with which this aspect of health is treated. The aim should be to consider the health and well-being of the whole person; organisations have a responsibility to manage stress and mental health at work, making sure employees are aware of the services and support available to them and how to access them. It's also crucial that employers promote an open and inclusive culture so that employees feel confident about discussing a mental health issue and discussing the challenges they are experiencing.

We're also seeing a distinct trend of reactive measures when it comes to how most organisations support people with mental health issues. These are very important and there will undoubtedly be times when an employee needs to take time off, but we also

<sup>1</sup> CIPD. (2017) *Employee outlook*. Spring. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. Available at: [www.cipd.co.uk/Images/employee-outlook\\_2017-spring\\_tcm18-21163.pdf](http://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/employee-outlook_2017-spring_tcm18-21163.pdf) [Accessed 22 February 2018].

<sup>2</sup> CIPD. (2018) *UK Working Lives*. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. Available at: [www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/work/trends/uk-working-lives](http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/work/trends/uk-working-lives) [Accessed 25 April 2018].

need to see more preventative steps to promote good mental well-being; where possible, employees experiencing stress or mental ill health should be able to access support before problems escalate. If an employer is aware of the challenges faced by individuals, and there is a supportive dialogue between the employee and their line manager, it should be possible for the organisation to put in place supportive measures, such as adjustments to workload or a small change in working hours that could make all the difference in some cases.

### **Strengthen the capability of line managers**

Line managers have a pivotal role in promoting employee well-being and attendance. Our findings show that health and well-being activity has more positive outcomes where line managers are bought into the importance of well-being.

Public sector organisations are more likely than their private sector counterparts to report (for both short- and long-term absence) that line managers take primary responsibility for managing absence, that they are trained in absence-handling and that they receive tailored support.

However, there is still a substantial proportion of public sector organisations that are not providing line managers with tailored support to manage absence, and organisations in the public sector also vary in the extent to which they invest in the training of line managers. Line managers play a critical role in ensuring that policies and practices are consistently applied and embedded in the organisational culture. Effective training can help to ensure that managers have a clear understanding of people management policies. It can also boost the confidence and competence of line managers to develop healthy relationships with staff, be alert to unmanageable workloads or targets, and promote a healthy working environment in their team.

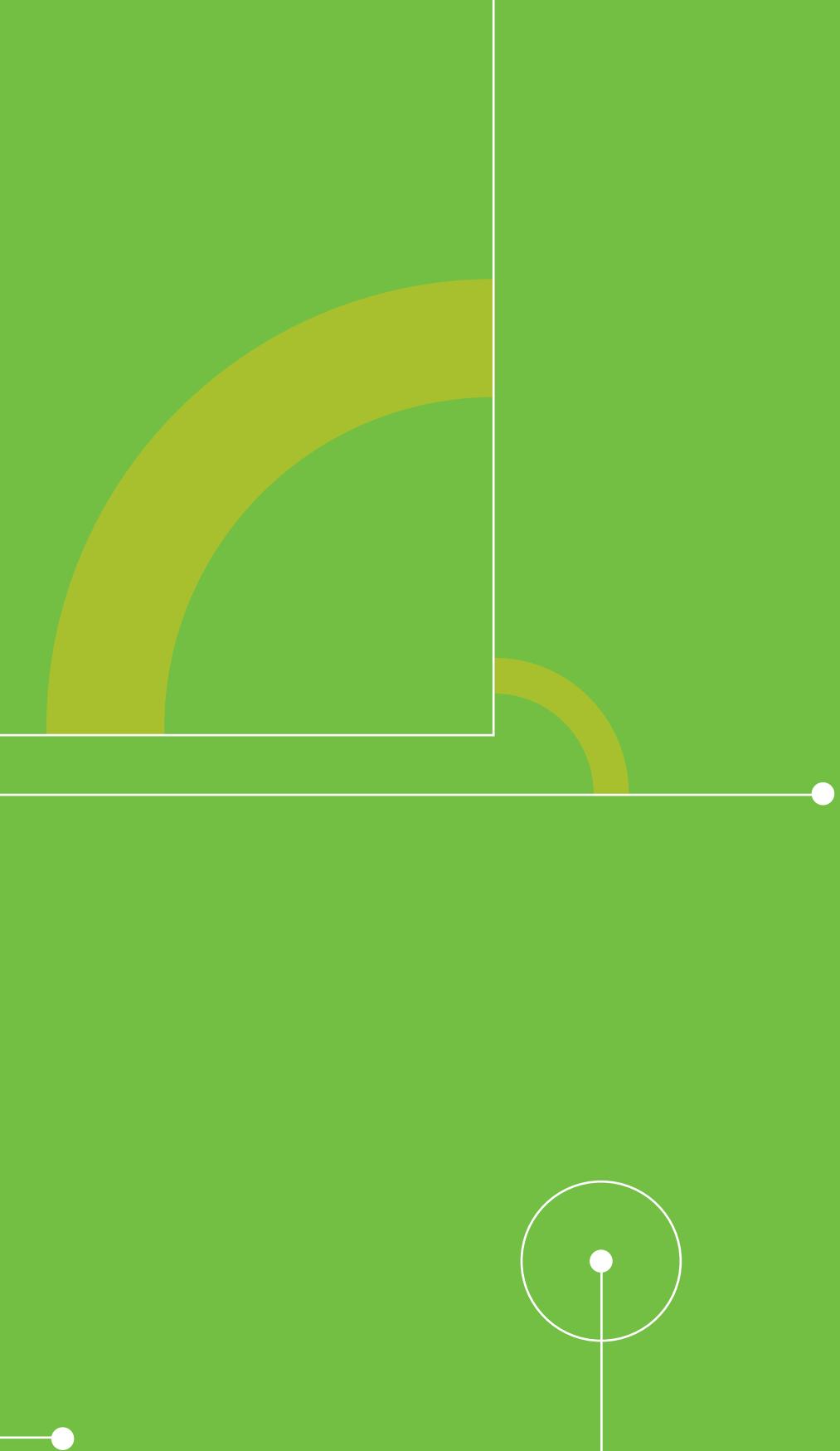
### **Ensure a holistic approach**

Employee well-being is multi-faceted. The physical, mental, emotional, lifestyle and financial aspects of health are interrelated, which is why an organisation's approach to health and well-being needs to be holistic. Our findings show that the public sector has a strong focus on mental and physical health but less of a focus on promoting other aspects of well-being, in particular financial well-being. Recent CIPD research suggests that financial insecurity is increasing and highlights the impact of poor financial well-being on the psychological well-being of individual workers as well as business performance: one in four workers report money worries have affected their ability to do their job, one in ten say they have found it hard to concentrate/make decisions at work because of money worries and 19% have lost sleep worrying about money.<sup>3</sup>

Our findings show a clear case for taking action and highlight the importance of a holistic and integrated approach to employee well-being. HR is ideally placed to drive forward the well-being agenda through increasing organisational awareness of the value of a healthy workforce and by developing a fully integrated approach to a healthy workplace, underpinned by strong support from leaders and managers.

---

<sup>3</sup> CIPD. (2017) *Employee financial well-being: why it's important*. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. Available at: [www.cipd.co.uk/Images/financial-well-being-why-its-important-report\\_tcm18-17441.pdf](http://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/financial-well-being-why-its-important-report_tcm18-17441.pdf) [Accessed 22 February 2018].



# CIPD

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development  
151 The Broadway London SW19 1JQ United Kingdom  
**T** +44 (0)20 8612 6200 **F** +44 (0)20 8612 6201  
**E** [cipd@cipd.co.uk](mailto:cipd@cipd.co.uk) **W** [cipd.co.uk](http://cipd.co.uk)

Incorporated by Royal Charter  
Registered as a charity in England and Wales (1079797)  
Scotland (SC045154) and Ireland (20100827)

Issued: May 2018 Reference: 7669 © CIPD 2018