

The State of Employee Health and Well-being 2021



Boost employee
well-being in an
age of uncertainty



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Executive Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on work over the last year, with most HR professionals agreeing that it has significantly reduced employee well-being. Even so, more than four-fifths of HR professionals say their organizations have generally done a good job safeguarding employees during this crisis.

Although this period has included some major shifts in how organizations address employee well-being, it has also helped justify approaches that were established well before the pandemic and that will continue after it is over.

Generally speaking, the concepts of employee well-being and employee wellness have evolved over the last 20 years. Today, the concept of well-being encompasses not only physical and mental well-being but also social, financial and environmental well-being. Employee wellness programs have been expanded to reflect this more holistic idea of well-being. In addition, the term “employee well-being programs” has become much more widely used than it was 20 years.

Employee well-being is increasingly linked with employee experience, which is another more expansive concept that has grown more important in recent years. Indeed, the HR Research Institute’s most recent study of employee experience has found that about three-quarters of HR professionals report employee experience is more important than it was three years ago and that organizations are expending considerable effort on those enhancing employee experiences.¹ These experiences are believed to impact a range of other positive business outcomes including recruitment, retention, engagement, performance and productivity.

To learn more about these issues, we undertook this study to determine the current state of employee well-being and how organizations have trying to influence and safeguard well-being in recent times.

About this Survey

The “State of Employee Health and Well-being 2021” survey ran in December 2020 and January 2021. We gathered 421 usable complete and partial responses, primarily from HR professionals in virtually every industry vertical. Respondents are from all over the world, with the majority from the North America, especially the United States.

The participants represent a broad cross-section of employers by number of employees, ranging from small businesses with fewer than 50 employees to enterprises with 20,000+ employees. Most respondents (58%) represent organizations with 1,000 or employees, 28% represent organizations with between 100 and 999 employees, and 18% represent organizations with fewer than 100 employees.

¹ HR.com. (2021, February). *The State of Human Experience in the Workplace 2021*.

Below are some of our key findings:

Key Finding 1

Programs related to workplace well-being are common, with 94% of responding HR professionals saying their organization strives to enhance at last one type of employee well-being through a specific initiative.

Key Finding 2

Many take a wide-ranging view of well-being. A large segment regards well-being as an area that stretches beyond physical and mental health. Forty-four percent pursue an approach that also encompasses financial, social and workplace environmental well-being.

Key Finding 3

Most agree that their well-being efforts are at least moderately effective. About half call their efforts moderately effective, and 46% say their efforts are highly effective.

Key Finding 4

Covid-19 had an undeniable impact on the workplace, with 64% of all responding HR professionals saying the pandemic has significantly reduced the overall well-being of their workforce.

Key Finding 5

Nonetheless, a majority believe their organizations have performed well in coping with the pandemic. Some 84% of say their companies have done a good job of supporting employee well-being since the pandemic began in 2020.

Key Finding 6

A majority have adopted a variety of initiatives that can be used to help improve employee well-being during the pandemic. Among the most common are:

- allowing more employees to work remotely
- instituting a mask policy
- increasing social distancing in shared workspaces
- ensuring employees have the resources needed to do their jobs
- providing information resources to help employees cope

Key
Finding **7**

More organizations have adopted virtual care arrangements. About half of respondents say their organizations now provide telemedicine/virtual healthcare offerings.

Key
Finding **8**

Mental health has become a top priority for many organizations. Sixty-three percent agree that mental health is among HR's top five priorities.

Key
Finding **9**

Stress remains serious a hindrance to workforce well-being. Problems related to work/life balance and heavy workloads are most likely to cause stress for employees. While these have always been problem areas, the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have exacerbated them.

Key
Finding **10**

Organizations that report being better at implementing effective well-being programs are also more likely to:

- offer a wider range of well-being initiatives
- respond more effectively to the pandemic
- have fewer employee stressors in the workplace
- place a higher priority on mental health and associated resources and support
- report better outcomes in the areas of employee experience, retention, engagement, and performance
- say they plan even more well-being initiatives within the next two years

Please note that the findings and recommendations contained in this report are informational only. Nothing in this report should be construed as constituting legal opinions or advice. Please consult an attorney if you have questions about the legal requirements, rules or regulations associated with employee wellness and well-being.

The Pandemic's Impact on Well-being

There can be no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic has been defining moment for today's businesses, especially in hard hit nations such as the United States. As this report goes to press, the U.S. has endured over 27 million documented cases of Covid-19 and has suffered over 460,000 deaths.² Globally, there have been over 106 million cases and over 2,325,000 deaths so far."³

During this period, the threat of a rapidly spreading infection dramatically altered how, or even whether, people worked, traveled, shopped, vacationed and more. Many businesses adapted quickly to allow those who could do so to work from home. Others modified the workplace to allow for social distancing, staggered shifts to minimize occupancy and installed barriers and other fixtures to improve both safety and employees' overall sense of security as they interacted with customers and each other.

The number of employees affected has been unprecedented—42% of Americans⁴ now work remotely, for example, as part of the effort to ensure employee well-being. In this sense, the desire to keep employees well and safe has directly contributed to one of the most rapid and massive workplace changes in history.

Many workers confronting pandemic-related health issues have found support in well-being or wellness programs that employers already had in place or recently adopted.

² The New York Times. (2021, February 9). *Coronavirus in the U.S.: latest map and case count*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html>

³ Johns Hopkins University University of Medicine (2021, February 9). *Coronavirus Resource Center*. Retrieved from <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

⁴ Wong, M. (2020, June 29). Stanford research provides a snapshot of a new working-from-home economy. *Stanford News*. Retrieved from <https://news.stanford.edu/2020/06/29/snapshot-new-working-home-economy/>



Finding: Nearly two-thirds of HR professionals say the pandemic has significantly reduced the overall well-being of their workforce

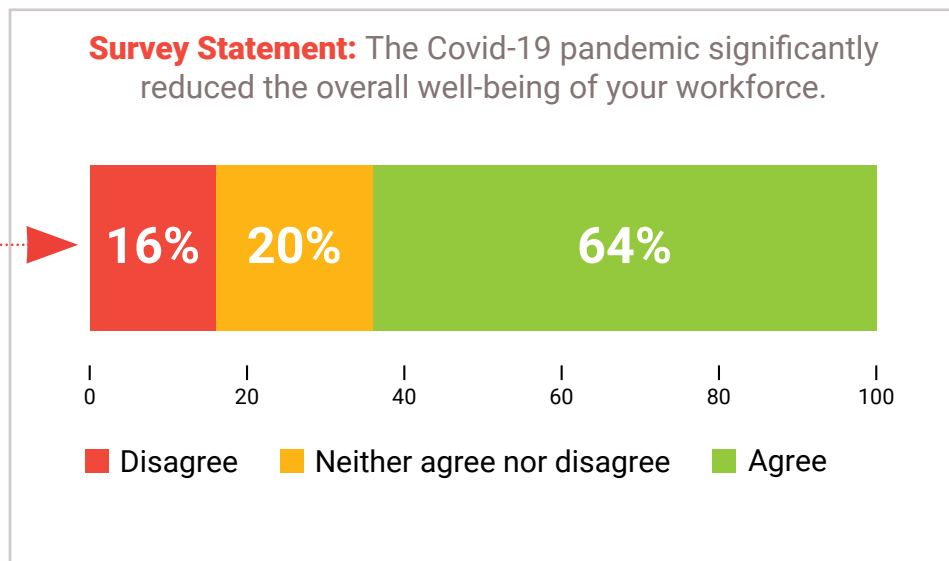
Sixty-four percent of all employers agree that the Covid-19 pandemic significantly reduced the overall well-being of their workforce, with 13% strongly agreeing and 51% agreeing. As the graph below shows, this has happened to organizations of all sizes.

Although, as we will see, many organizations have offered support to workers when they could, it has not been possible for them to address all of the pressures the crisis has imposed. After all, there have been many factors—such as cultural mores, government actions, economic pressures, financial obligations, and mutations in the virus itself—that have been beyond the control of most organizations.

That said, some organizations have offered more assistance than others, and these organizations appear to enjoy a number of organizational benefits.



Only 16% of survey participants actively *disagree* that Covid-19 has significantly reduced their employees' well-being



Editor's Note: This graph combines "strongly agree" and "agree" responses as well as "strongly disagree" and "disagree" responses.

Employers' Responses to the Pandemic

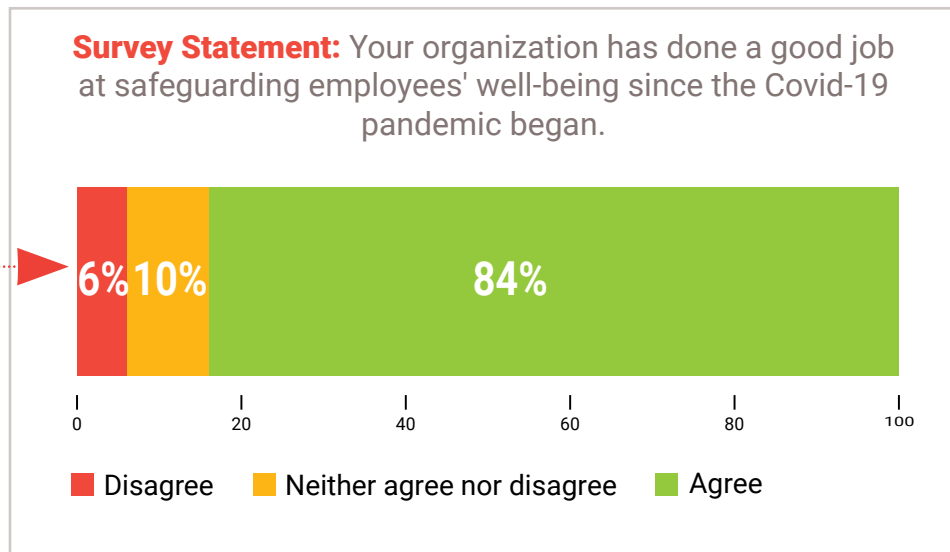


Finding: Most HR professionals believe their organizations have done a good job of safeguarding employee well-being since the pandemic began

The majority of HR professionals, 84%, believe their organizations have done a good job of safeguarding their employees' well-being since the coronavirus appeared early in 2020. It is possible there is some bias in these findings since HR professionals themselves are often integral to running the programs designed to keep employees safe, and employees themselves may take a different view. Nonetheless, the findings indicate that HR professionals have been working hard to help keep employees safe and may feel some pride in their accomplishments.



Only 6% actively disagree that their organization has done a good job of safeguarding employees



Editor's Note: This graph combines "strongly agree" and "agree" responses as well as "strongly disagree" and "disagree" responses.



Finding: Most businesses are implementing expert-backed policies

Soon after the pandemic began, infectious disease experts agreed that certain measures could mitigate Covid-19's spread and enhance the safety of enclosed spaces such as restaurants, warehouses and retail stores. Our survey shows the majority of employers implemented many of these measures.

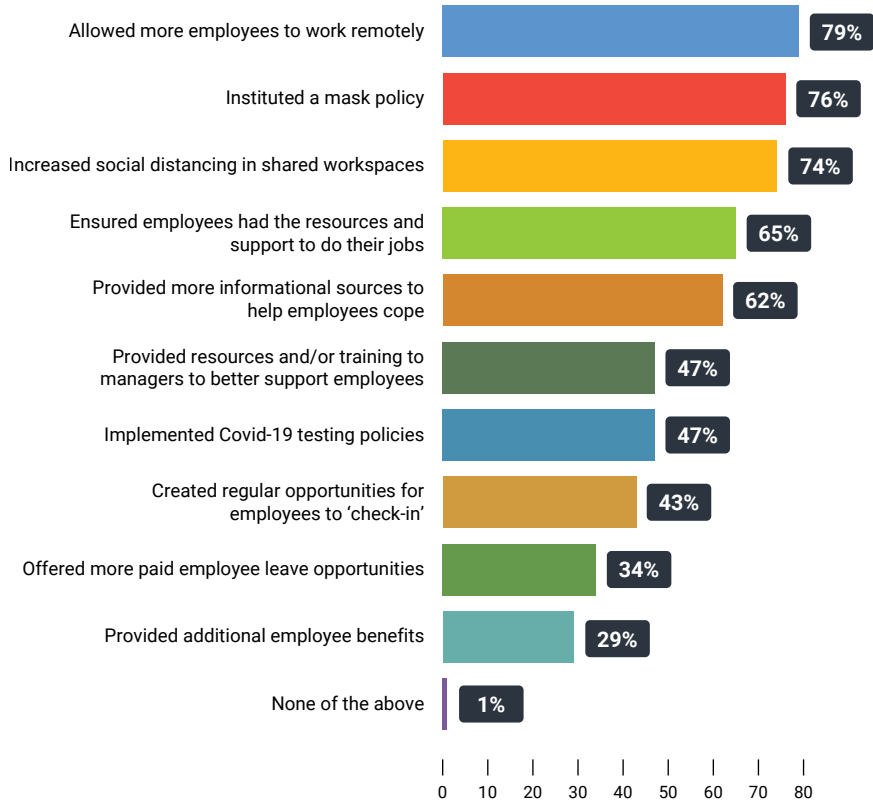
Specifically, 79% of the organizations have helped employees maintain social distancing by allowing more employees to work remotely. Nearly as many (76%) have instituted some kind of mask-wearing policy, and 74% have required social distancing on-premises.

In addition to these practices, well over half say that they've ensured employees have the resources and support they need to carry out their jobs (65%) and/or have provided more informational sources to help employees cope (62%). Of course, providing needed resources and support—such as computers, Internet access, videoconferencing applications and more—to employees who are newly working from home can be imperative to keeping them productive. Likewise, providing them with the information they need can not only aid their productivity but also reduce their stress levels.

By size of organization

Larger companies are more likely to offer remote work arrangements. Whereas 82% of large employers have allowed more employees to work remotely, only 76% of mid-sized organizations and 74% of small ones have done do.

Survey Question: Since the Covid-19 pandemic began, what types of initiatives has your organization used to better secure employee well-being? (select all that apply)



The Types of Well-being That Employers Address



Finding: Most employers provide at least one well-being initiative, and many provide initiatives for five different types of well-being

Nearly all responding HR professionals (94%) say that their employer provides at least one type of initiative intended to enhance some aspect of employee well-being. Moreover, many (44%) take a multidimensional view of employee well-being and provide initiatives that address each of the five types of well-being we asked about:

- physical well-being
- mental/emotional well-being
- well-being related to the workplace environment
- financial well-being
- social well-being

Physical and Mental Well-being Initiatives Still Dominate

For as long as there have been wellness programs, they have tended to include initiatives geared toward physical and mental well-being. These have formed the cornerstone of employee wellness programs for decades, so these programs tend to be the most mature, well-known and familiar. About three-quarters of respondents offer initiatives related to these two types of well-being. We discuss specific programs associated with them later in this study.

Workforce Environmental Well-being Initiatives Are Also Common

Nearly as many HR professionals say their organizations provide initiatives related to the workplace environment (73%). Employers have been considering the impact of the workspace on employees for hundreds of years, but one of the most significant developments occurred in the early 20th century when Frederick Winslow Taylor started the Scientific Management movement.⁵ He and his colleagues studied how work was performed, and Taylor concluded that making people work hard was not as efficient as optimizing the way they performed their work and the way the workplace was laid out.

Taylor was, however, famously criticized for making work monotonous and unfulfilling as employees were required to do one or a few small and rigidly defined pieces of work instead of using complex skill sets. Some felt Taylor was turning people into automatons.

As a counterpoint of these influences, management thinkers also began thinking about the impact of work on health.⁶ In 1919, the work of Polish scientist by Józefa Joteyko, who wrote *The Science of Labour and Its Organization*, was published in English. It included ideas such as the measurement of occupational fatigue.

The idea of “ergonomics” emerged. This refers to an applied science that focuses on designing and arranging workplace tools and objects so that people and things interact both efficiently and safely. In 1921, Kan-ichi Tanaka published *Research of Efficiency: Ergonomics*, which introduced human engineering to Japan.

Since that time, a variety of groups (management thinkers and labor unions, as well as employers) have devoted considerable time and effort into thinking about how the work environment influences employee health and well-being. This history has affected the development and usage of well-being related to the workplace environment.

⁵ Eyre, E. (2010, March). Frederick Taylor and scientific management: understanding Taylorism and early management theory. *Mind Tools*. Retrieved from https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMM_Taylor.htm

⁶ Japan Human Factors and Ergonomics Society. *History of ergonomics*. Retrieved from https://www.ergonomics.jp/e_index/e_outline/e_ergono-history.html

The workplace environment is affected by a range of influences and factors. They tend to include initiatives related to “ergonomic accommodations” (e.g., standing desks), employee breakrooms, and “green” environment initiatives such as recycling. They can also include incorporating more natural elements into the workspace, such as gardens, living plants and natural light. There is, in fact, a growing body of research suggesting that employee access to greenery and green spaces can increase both wellness and productivity.

Financial Well-being

About two-thirds provide initiatives related to financial well-being. This type of well-being has become especially relevant in the pandemic-driven economic downturn. The Reuters news service reports on the impact in the United States:

The U.S. economy contracted at its deepest pace since World War Two in 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic depressed consumer spending and business investment, pushing millions of Americans out of work and into poverty. Though a recovery is underway, momentum slowed significantly as the year wound down amid a resurgence in coronavirus infections and exhaustion of nearly \$3 trillion in relief money from the government. The moderation is likely to persist at least through the first three months of 2021.⁷

⁷ Mutikani, L. (2021, January 28). COVID-19 savages U.S. economy, 2020 performance worst in 74 years. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-economy/covid-19-savages-u-s-economy-2020-performance-worst-in-74-years-idINKBN29X018>

Paid work has, of course, always been inextricably linked to financial well-being, but this topic has become more prominent in recent years. Some is linked to stagnant wage growth in some countries. Referring to the U.S., the Pew Research Center reports, “[D]espite some ups and downs over the past several decades, today’s real average wage (that is, the wage after accounting for inflation) has about the same purchasing power it did 40 years ago. And what wage gains there have been have mostly flowed to the highest-paid tier of workers.”⁸

Other factors have also influenced employee financial well-being. One of the most critical for younger employees is the issue of student loans. A recent *Forbes* article reports, “Student loan debt is now the second highest consumer debt category - behind only mortgage debt - and higher than both credit cards and auto loans. According to Make Lemonade, there are more than 44 million borrowers who collectively owe \$1.5 trillion in student loan debt in the U.S. alone.”⁹ A PwC research report on financial well-being found that 64% of employees are impacted by student loans, and 54% of employees are stressed about their finances.¹⁰

Social Well-being

Sixty-two percent of participants say their employers have initiatives geared toward social well-being. Compared to the types of well-being listed above, employee social well-being tends to be a newer employer concern. Over the last several decades, research has shown that factors such as employee relationships have an impact on employee engagement and retention.¹¹ And other studies indicate such relations affect overall well-being. For example, the Harvard Study of Adult Development, which tracked the lives of 724 men for 79 years, showed relationships have a large impact on health, happiness and the quality of life.¹²

⁸ Desilver, D. (2018, August 7). For most U.S. workers, real wages have barely budged in decades. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/07/for-most-us-workers-real-wages-have-barely-budged-for-decades/>

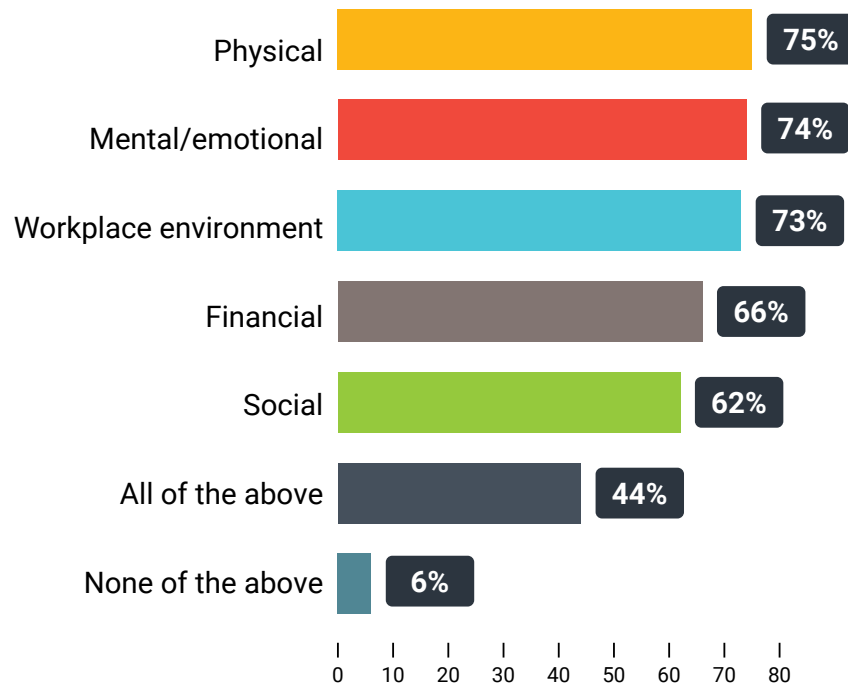
⁹ Friedman, Z. (2018, June 13). Student load debt statistics in 2018: a \$1.5 trillion crisis. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackfriedman/2018/06/13/student-loan-debt-statistics-2018/#5ed180e27310>

¹⁰ PwC. (2020, May). *Employee financial wellness survey: 2020 COVID-19 update*. Retrieved from <https://www.pwc.com/us/en/services/consulting/workforce-of-the-future/library/financial-well-being-retirement-survey.html>

¹¹ Kohll, A. (2018, January 31). 5 reasons social connections can enhance your employee wellness program. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alankohll/2018/01/31/5-ways-social-connections-can-enhance-your-employee-wellness-program/#3aac0460527c>

¹² Mejia, Z. (2018, March 20). Harvard's longest study of adult life reveals how you can be happier and more successful. *CNBC*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/20/this-harvard-study-reveals-how-you-can-be-happier-and-more-successful.html>

Survey Question: Which types of employee well-being does your organization strive to enhance via specific initiatives?
(select all that apply)



The Effectiveness of Well-being Programs



Finding: Nearly half of HR professionals say their employer's well-being initiatives are highly effective

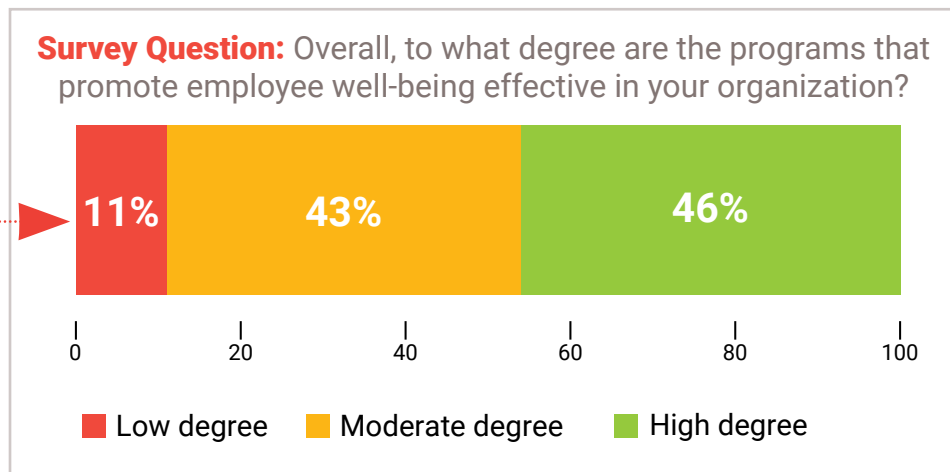
Among organizations with some kind of well-being programs, nearly half (46%) of HR professionals say those initiatives are either highly (31%) or very highly (15%) effective. Roughly half of all businesses see their efforts as moderately effective and only 11% see their efforts as only being effective to a low or very low degree.

By size of organization

There are considerable differences when we look at the data by size of organization. Small organizations are least likely to have any well-being program at all (16% have no program at all), but among those that do, just 20% say their offerings are highly effective. Among mid-sized companies, however, only 3% lack such programs and 46% say they are highly effective. Among respondents from large organizations, 52% indicate their well-being programs are highly effective, the largest proportion of any company size.



Only 11% say their well-being programs are relatively ineffective



Editor's Note: This graph combines "very high degree" and "high degree" responses as well as "very low degree" and "low degree" responses.

Methods for Promoting Physical Well-being and Workplace Safety



Finding: Healthcare benefits represent the most common offering, but virtual care arrangements have been growing fast

A little more than three-quarters (76%) of employers that provide well-being programs offer healthcare benefits, making it by far the most common way that employers promote physical well-being. Of course, there are many other ways of promoting physical well-being, with the next most common ones being providing resource materials (53%), telemedicine/virtual healthcare (51%), and lifestyle or wellness coaching (48%).

The widespread usage of telemedicine deserves special mention here because it has played a key role during the pandemic. Understandably, more people have been leery of visiting their doctor's offices at a time when they are concerned that they could be exposing themselves to the highly contagious Covid-19 virus.

Indeed, we investigated this topic in greater detail via our "The Future of Employee Healthcare" pulse survey, which was fielded from August to November of 2020. In that survey, we asked HR professionals about which healthcare trends they thought were emerging and/or would emerge over the coming year as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.¹³

The top answer by a large margin was "expanded telemedicine/virtual care arrangements," selected by 90% of respondents, followed by "greater focus on mental health and well-being" and "more at-home screenings and testing."

¹³ HR Research Institute. (2020, December). *The Future of Employee Healthcare*. Retrieved from https://www.hr.com/en/resources/free_research_white_papers/the-future-of-employee-healthcare-2020-infographic_kj9j29n8.html

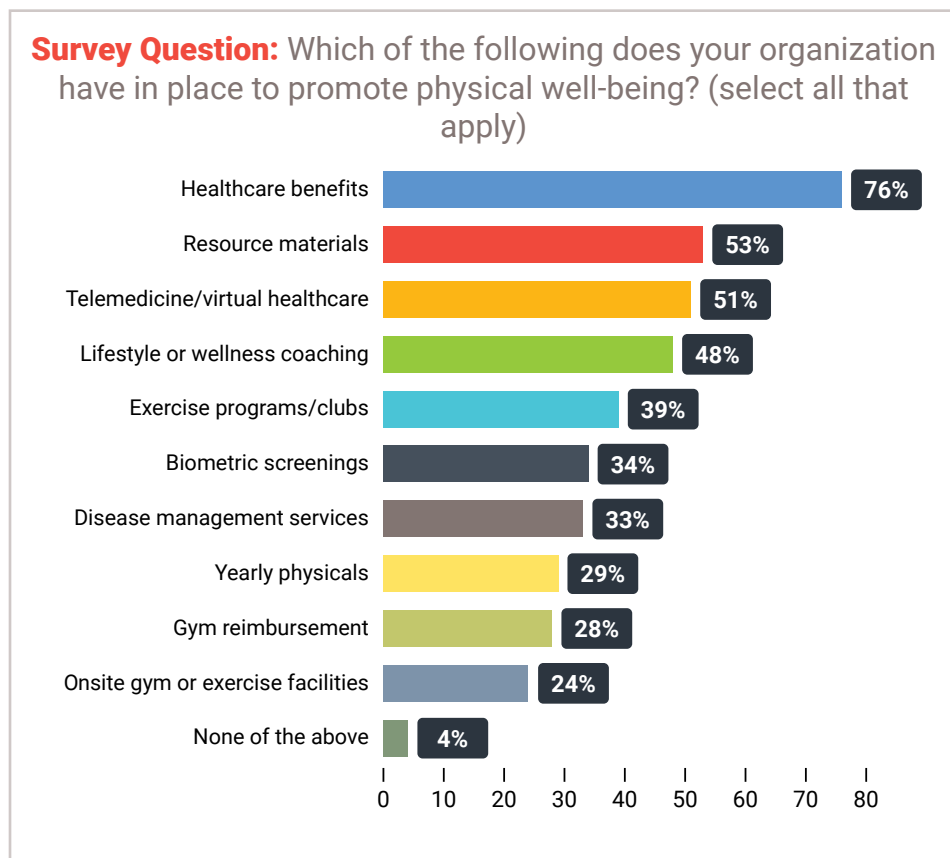
That investigation showed that the top two components of virtual care systems are:

- remote conferencing with a doctor, and
- remote monitoring of health conditions

We discovered that of HR professionals in organizations that already had such virtual care arrangements, 43% said their organizations had only recently adopted them. Therefore, we believe virtual care arrangements represent an important recent trend in physical well-being offerings.

By size of organization

Companies with fewer than 100 employees are the least likely to offer well-being initiatives of any kind. This applies to both widely used benefits and some that are relatively new. For example, 70% of small firms offer health insurance, compared to 75% of employers overall. Two-fifths (41%) offer telemedicine, compared to 51% overall, and a similar pattern is seen with coaching (19% vs. 48%) and disease management (16% vs. 33%).





Finding: Wearing protective gear and taking steps to reduce the spread of contagions are the most commonly encouraged or required workplace safety actions

Obviously, workplace safety is not new but Covid-19 added a raft of new concerns. Before 2020, employers had a large amount of control over their facilities' safety environment. They implemented procedures and installed equipment to protect workers from both obvious and silent hazards, from moving vehicles to carbon monoxide.

Covid-19 added several layers of difficulty to the challenge of keeping the workplaces safe, especially in the U.S. First, it is a new disease, and even though more is known today about how it spreads than was recognized in early 2020, researchers are still discovering new variants and behaviors. Second, the virus is so prevalent in the U.S., it is all but impossible to seal a workplace well enough to treat it as a "Covid-19-free zone." There is a third related point: the virus is virtually everywhere in the U.S., meaning employees protected at work may still be exposed as they commute, or visit family, or even relax in their homes.

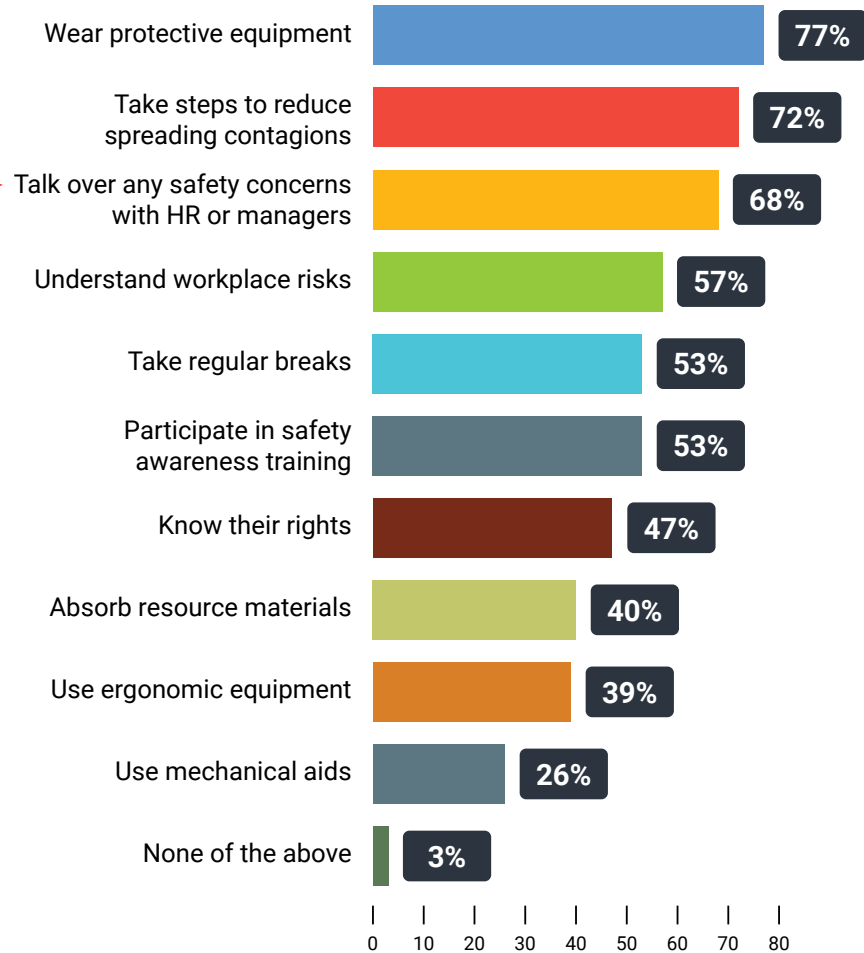
Given these trends, it makes sense that the single most commonly encouraged or required safety action in the survey is the wearing of protective equipment (77%), which often means masks, in the workplace. The next most commonly encouraged or required action is taking steps to reduce contagions (72%). Clearly, these two safety actions are related to one another as ways of controlling the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

The third most commonly encouraged or required action (68%) is to "talk over any safety concerns with HR/management." This highlights the crucial role of communications as a means of keeping people safe during the pandemic, but it also applies to a wide range of other circumstances, from handling hazardous materials to preparing for potential violence in the workplace.



More than two-thirds encourage or require employees to talk over any safety concerns with HR or management

Survey Question: In order to increase workplace safety, which of the following actions are required or encouraged for employees in your organization? (select all that apply)



Mental Health and Stress in the Workplace

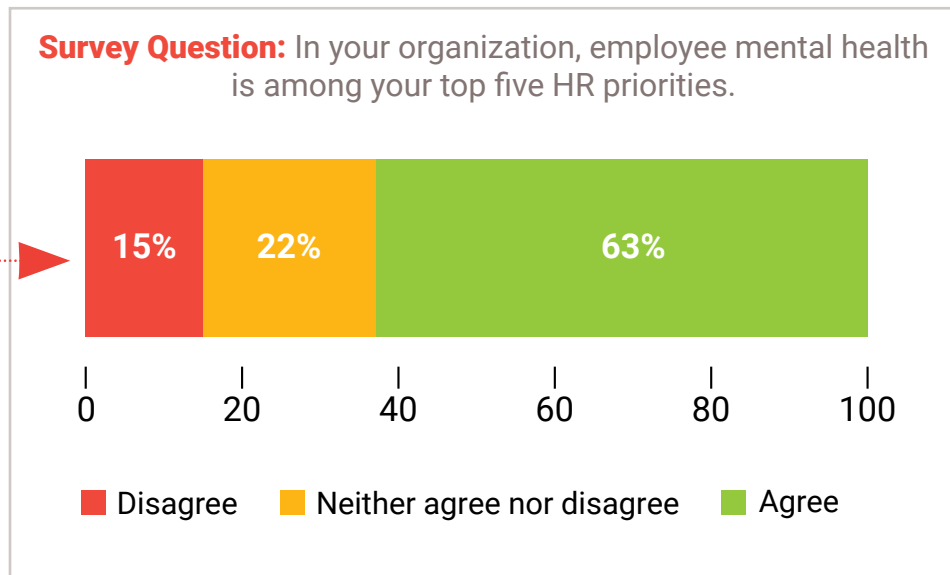


Finding: Sixty-three percent agree that mental health is among HR's top five priorities

Almost two-thirds of all respondents report that the mental health of their employees is among their top five HR priorities today. This prioritization is likely due, at least in part, to the mental and emotional toll that the pandemic has taken on employees. A November 2020 PwC pulse study of chief HR officers found that 84% said they were planning to provide more mental health support for employees.¹⁴



Just 15% actively disagree that mental health is among HR's top five priorities



Editor's Note: This graph combines "very high degree" and "high degree" responses as well as "very low degree" and "low degree" responses.

¹⁴ PwC. (2020). *Recovery starts with safety and confidence*. Retrieved from <https://www.pwc.com/us/en/library/covid-19/recovery-starts-with-safety-and-confidence.html>



Finding: Nearly three-quarters say their organizations have dealt with stress as a mental health issue over the last year

We asked, “Which of the following mental-health related issues have your organization's employees dealt with in the last 12 months?” Stress was the most common response, cited by 76%. This can be costly for businesses. According to Mental Health America, workplace stress costs American businesses some \$500 billion each year in lost productivity.¹⁵

In addition, other issues that are sometimes related to stress are also commonly reported. Fully 71% of HR professionals say their employees have been suffering anxiety, 60% say employees have experienced feelings of uncertainty and 56% say employees have suffered from depression.

Although these mental health issues were common before the pandemic, the Covid-19 crisis may have made them worse in many cases. In a 2020 survey of mental health professionals, 95% reported¹⁶ an increase in anxiety among clients, 85% said they'd seen more depression, 82% reported an increase in stress, and 53% said they were seeing more substance abuse.

By size of organization

HR professionals in large organizations are more likely to say their companies have dealt with most mental-health-related issues. Of course, having larger employee populations, they are very likely to see a wider incidence of these issues.

This aligns with other questions in the survey about stressors. HR professionals from large companies are more likely to report negative stress and to see more stress-inducing factors.

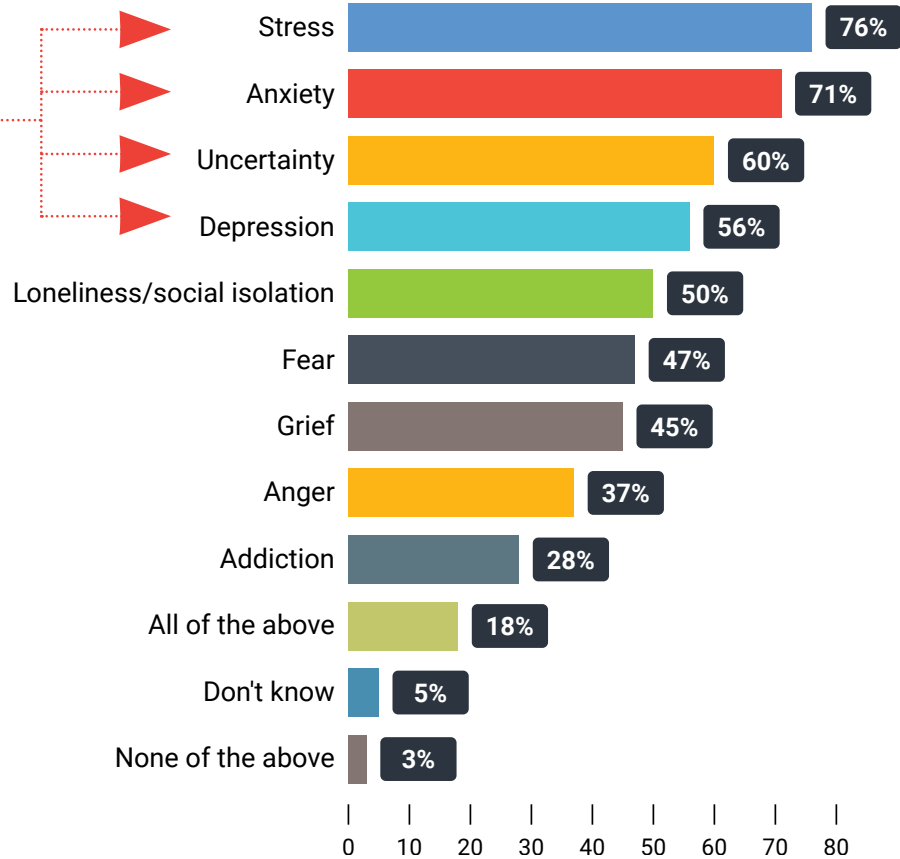
¹⁵ Mental Health America. (2017, October 18). *Mind the Workplace: Workplace Wellness Report*. Retrieved from <https://mhanational.org/research-reports/mind-workplace-workplace-wellness-report>

¹⁶ LaNeve, N. (2020, September 18). Mental Health in the Time of COVID-19. *The Recovery Village*. Retrieved from <https://www.therecoveryvillage.com/professionals/blog/mental-health-during-covid-19/>



More than half report that over the last year their organizations have dealt with anxiety, uncertainty and depression as well as stress

Survey Question: Which of the following mental-health related issues have your organization's employees dealt with in the last 12 months? (select all that apply)



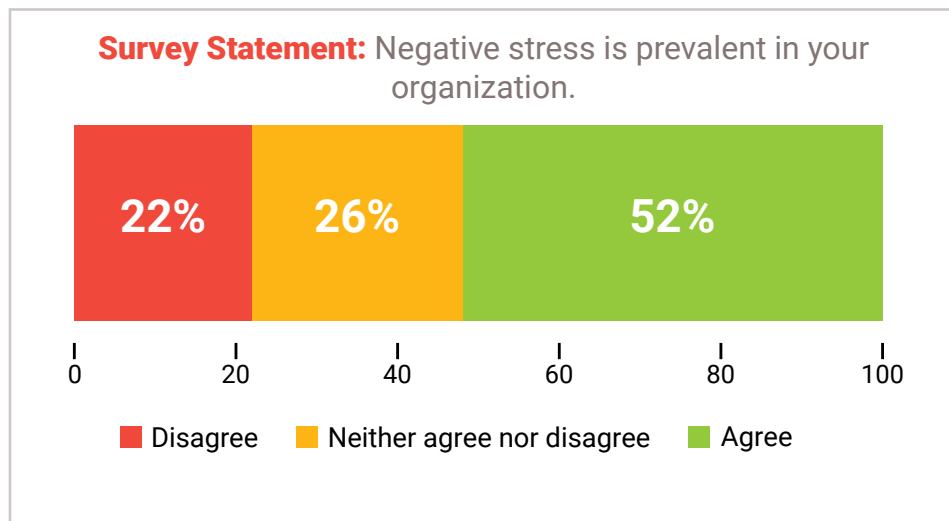


Finding: More than twice as many organizations agree as disagree that negative stress is prevalent in their organizations

For the purpose of conducting the survey on which this study is based, we stipulated that the word “stress” refers to negative emotional stress. Emotional stress can be positive or negative, with positive stress tending to be short-term and usually within our coping abilities. Negative stress, however, tends to cause anxiety and is perceived to be outside of our coping abilities. In addition, it’s often longer term in nature.

Stress continues to be major concern for over half of responding organizations. In fact, while 52% agree that negative stress is prevalent in their organizations, fewer than half as many (22%) actively disagree that this is the case.

Our research indicates that stress was a major issue even before the pandemic. Since then, of course, a wide range of stressful events have occurred both within and outside workplaces. In short, employee stress has become a common issue with which today’s organizations must cope.



Editor’s Note: This graph combines “strongly agree” and “agree” responses as well as “strongly disagree” and “disagree” responses.



Finding: Work/life balance and overwhelming workloads are the top two stressors for all employees

More than half of respondents identify work/life balance difficulties and the management of large workloads as the most stressful challenges for their employees. While problems with work/life balance have long been an issue for employees, the pandemic has made these issues more complex. Although they have affected people of every gender, these problems have disproportionately impinged on women with childcare and/or elder-care responsibilities. According to a recent study by S&P Global and AARP,¹⁷ parents now spend 58% more time on childcare responsibilities than they did before the pandemic.

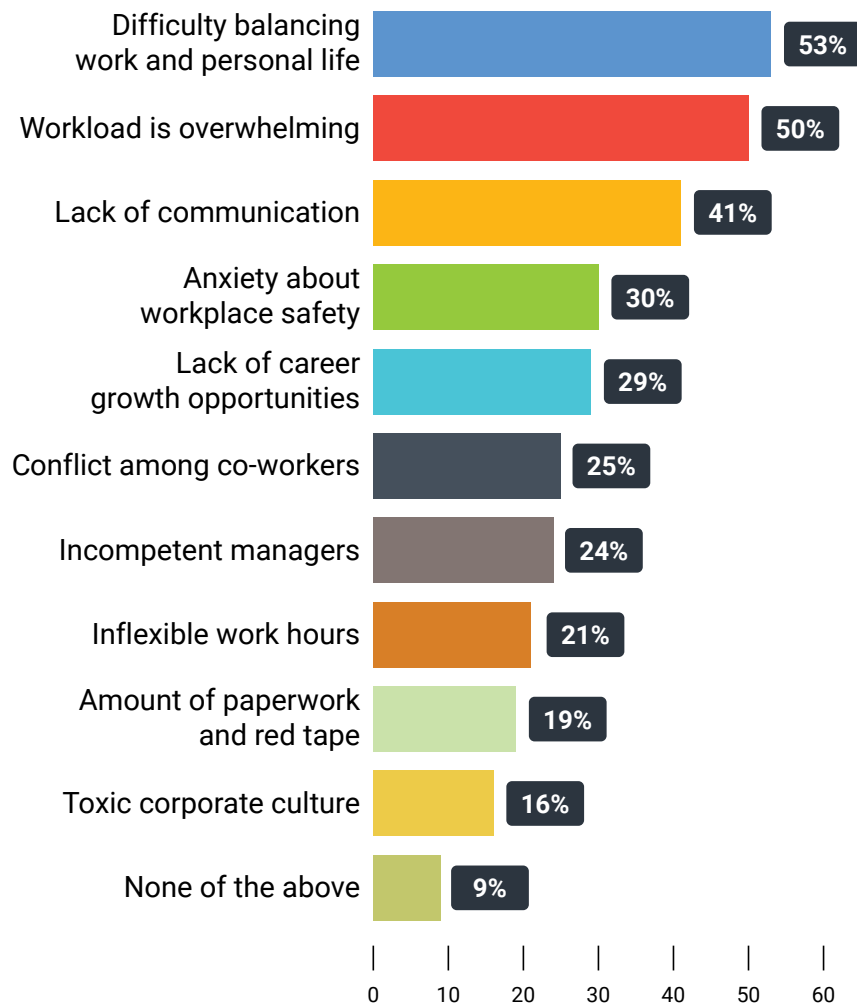
Bloomberg reports, “The lengthening of the work day observed as many began working from home last year has become the new normal in many countries....The U.K., Austria, Canada and U.S. have seen a sustained 2.5 hour increase to the average day.”¹⁸



¹⁷ Nematzadeh, A., Stovall, N. & Skufca, L. (2020, October). Companies expand family-friendly policies, but focus favors parents over caregivers. *S&P Global*. Retrieved from <https://www.spglobal.com/en/research-insights/featured/companies-expand-family-friendly-policies-but-focus-favors-parents-over-caregivers>

¹⁸ Meakin, L. (2021, February 2). Remote working's longer hours are new normal for many. *Bloomberg*. Retrieved from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-02-02/remote-working-s-longer-hours-are-new-normal-for-many-chart?sref=GJfVw2fX>

Survey Question: In your organization, what are the most common employee stressors? (select all that apply)





Finding: A majority of HR professionals agree that their organizations are excellent at helping workers address stress

Despite the fact that a little more than half of participants say stress is prevalent in their organizations, more than half (54%) also agree that their organizations are doing an excellent job in helping their workers address issues of stress. Is this a paradox? After all, how can stress be prevalent even while so many organizations are very good at addressing it?

Perhaps HR professionals are taking into consideration the widespread adoption of remote work and other flexible work arrangements, believing that this is a major initiative intended to reduce employee stress. Or perhaps they are thinking about a wide range of other possible programs and practices.

Whatever the case, this data makes us wonder if employers are expending more energy on helping employees *cope with* prevalent workplace stress rather than trying to *reduce* such stress in the first place. In other words, are most employers putting more effort into treating it or helping employees avoid it in the first place?



Nearly half (46%) do not say their organizations do an excellent of helping employees address stress issues



Editor's Note: This graph combines "strongly agree" and "agree" responses as well as "strongly disagree" and "disagree" responses.



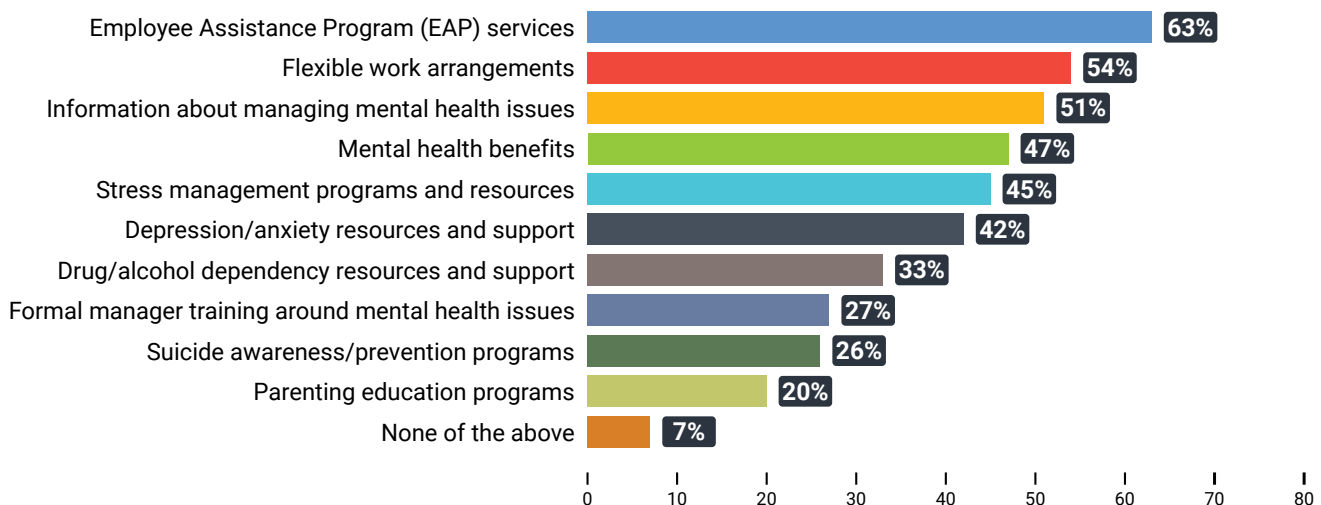
Finding: More than half of respondents are providing their employees with EAP programs, flexible work arrangements and information about managing mental health issues

We asked participants about the steps their organizations take in regard to employee mental health. The most common response by far is employee assistance programs, or EAPs, cited by 63%. The next two most common responses are “flexible work arrangements” and “information about managing behavioral health issues.” Meanwhile, despite the prevalence of stress in today’s workforce, only 45% offer stress management programs. Perhaps organizations depend on flexible work arrangements as ways of helping employees *avoid* a certain amount of work stress and depend on EAPs as a way of *coping with* existing work stress.

By size of organization

Compared to the aggregate, larger companies provide more support for depression and anxiety (50% vs. 42%), suicide prevention (31% vs. 26%), and formal manager training around mental health issues (32% vs. 27%).

Survey Question: Which steps does your organization take in regard to employee mental health? (select all that apply)



The Outcomes of Well-being Initiatives



Finding: Many HR professionals view well-being as having a positive impact on employee experience, engagement and retention

About half of participants say that employee well-being initiatives have a positive impact on employee experience, engagement and retention. More than two-fifths also say it leads to higher employee performance and less work-related stress.

Survey Question: Which of the following are outcomes of employee well-being initiatives in your organization? (select all that apply)



Only 11% say that well-being initiatives do not have a positive impact

Looking to the Near Future

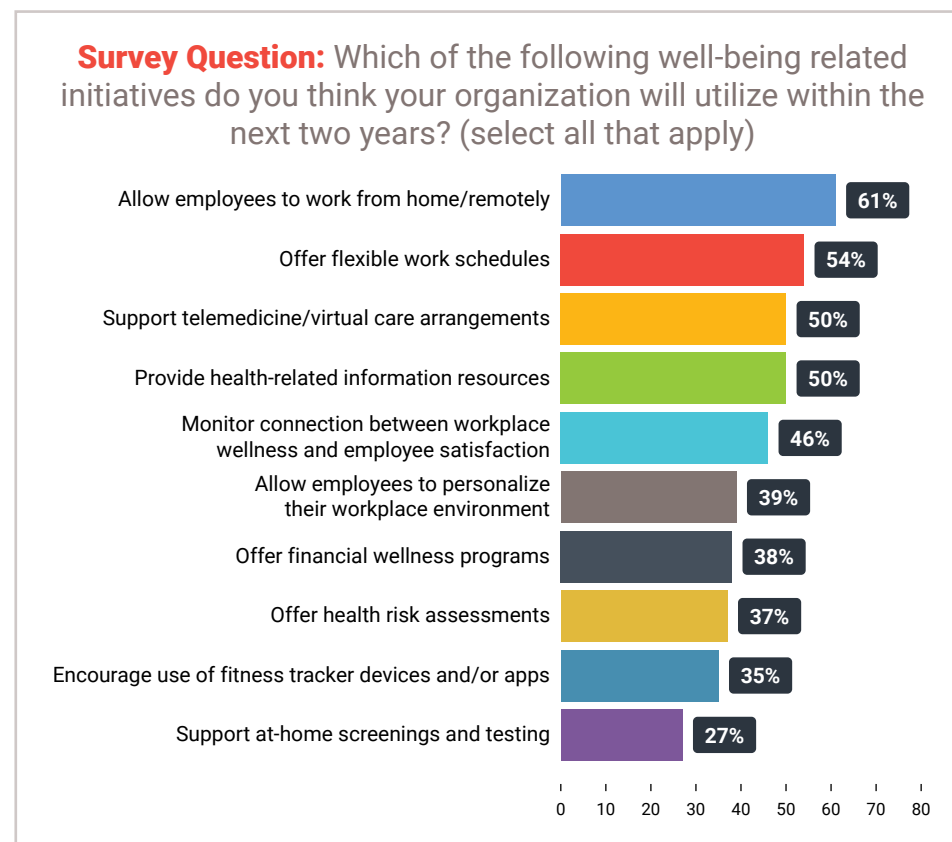


Finding: Flexible work arrangements will be widely used over the next two years, partly as a way of enhancing employee well-being

When we asked HR professionals about which well-being-related initiatives will be utilized over the next two years, the most common answers were “work remotely” (61%) and “offer flexible work schedules” (54%). Nearly half also gave the following answers:

- telemedicine/virtual care arrangements
- provide health-related information resources
- monitor workplace wellness/employee satisfaction

We can boil these responses down to greater flexibility, greater access to healthcare services and information, and greater monitoring of employee well-being.



How Well-being Leaders and Laggards Differ

How Do We Classify Well-being Leaders and Laggards?

We analyzed the survey data in several ways to gain insight into the practices most widely used by organizations that successfully manage well-being. In this section, we look at two respondent groups:

- **Well-being leaders:** These represent respondents who indicate that their organizations have *highly* or *very highly* effective programs that promote employee well-being.
- **Well-being laggards:** These represent respondents who indicate that their organizations have programs that promote employee well-being to only a *moderate*, *low* or *very low* degree.

These findings are correlational and do not prove cause and effect. Nevertheless, they are suggestive about what might enhance employee well-being.



Finding: Well-being leaders tend to offer a wider range of well-being initiatives

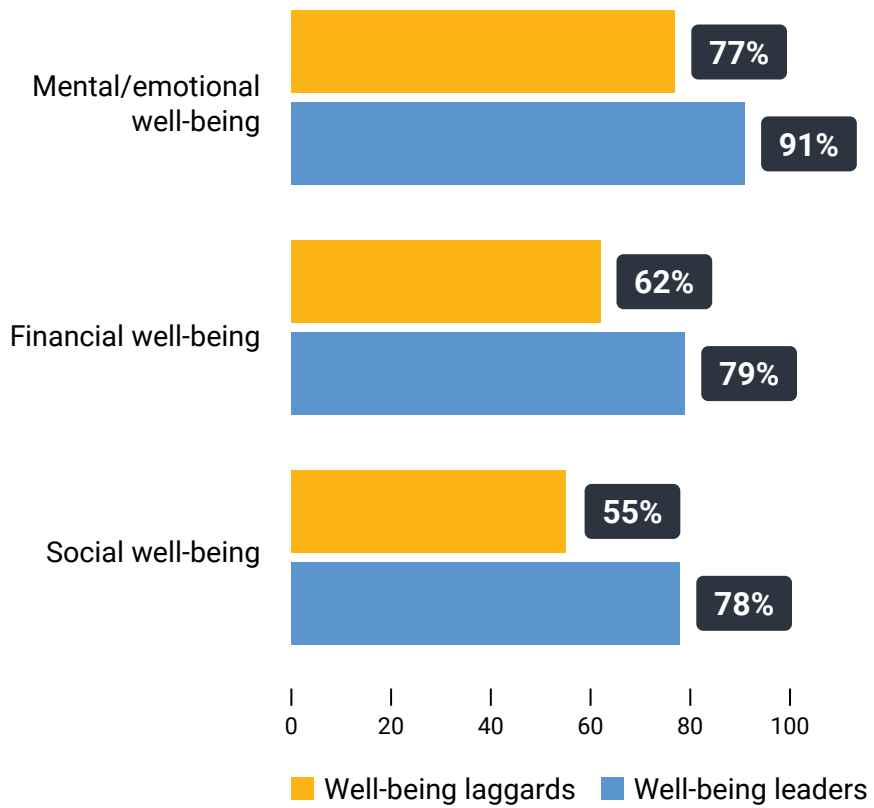
Well-being leaders emphasize a wider range of initiatives than do the laggards. Whereas 64% of well-being leader organizations have initiatives aimed at all five types of well-being, only 38% of laggards do. In short, leaders tend to have a more inclusive understanding of employee well-being.

Well-being leaders are especially more likely than laggards to have initiatives in the areas of:

- mental/emotional
- financial
- social

Well-being programs related to the workplace environment is the only area in which leaders and laggards place similar emphasis in terms of initiatives.

Survey Question: Which types of employee well-being does your organization strive to enhance via specific initiatives? (select all that apply)



Editor's Note: The five types of well-being studied for this research include mental/emotional, physical, financial, social, and well-being related to the workplace environment.





Finding: Well-being leaders respond more effectively to the pandemic

The majority of organizations believe they've done a good job safeguarding their employees' well-being since the pandemic began in early 2020. However, there's a notable difference between the responses of leaders and laggards. Among well-being leaders, 94% report they are doing a good job looking out for their workers' well-being during the pandemic, compared to 76% of laggards.

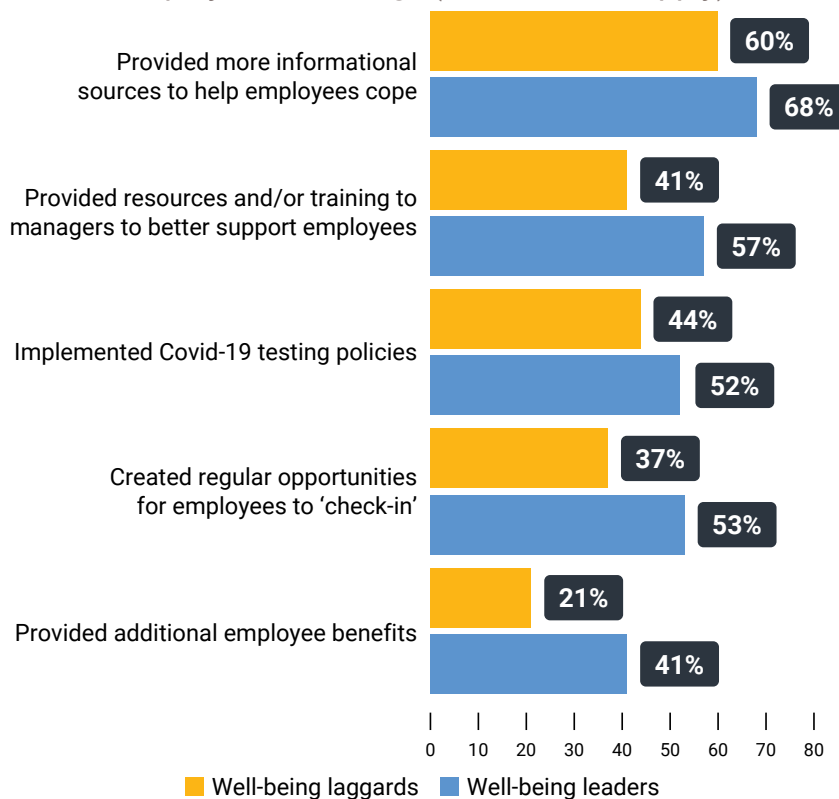
Well-being leaders are especially more likely than laggards to do the following:

- provide resources and/or training to managers to better support employees
- create regular opportunities for employees to "check in"
- provide additional employee benefits



Well-being leaders are especially more likely to train and develop managers so that managers can support employees more effectively

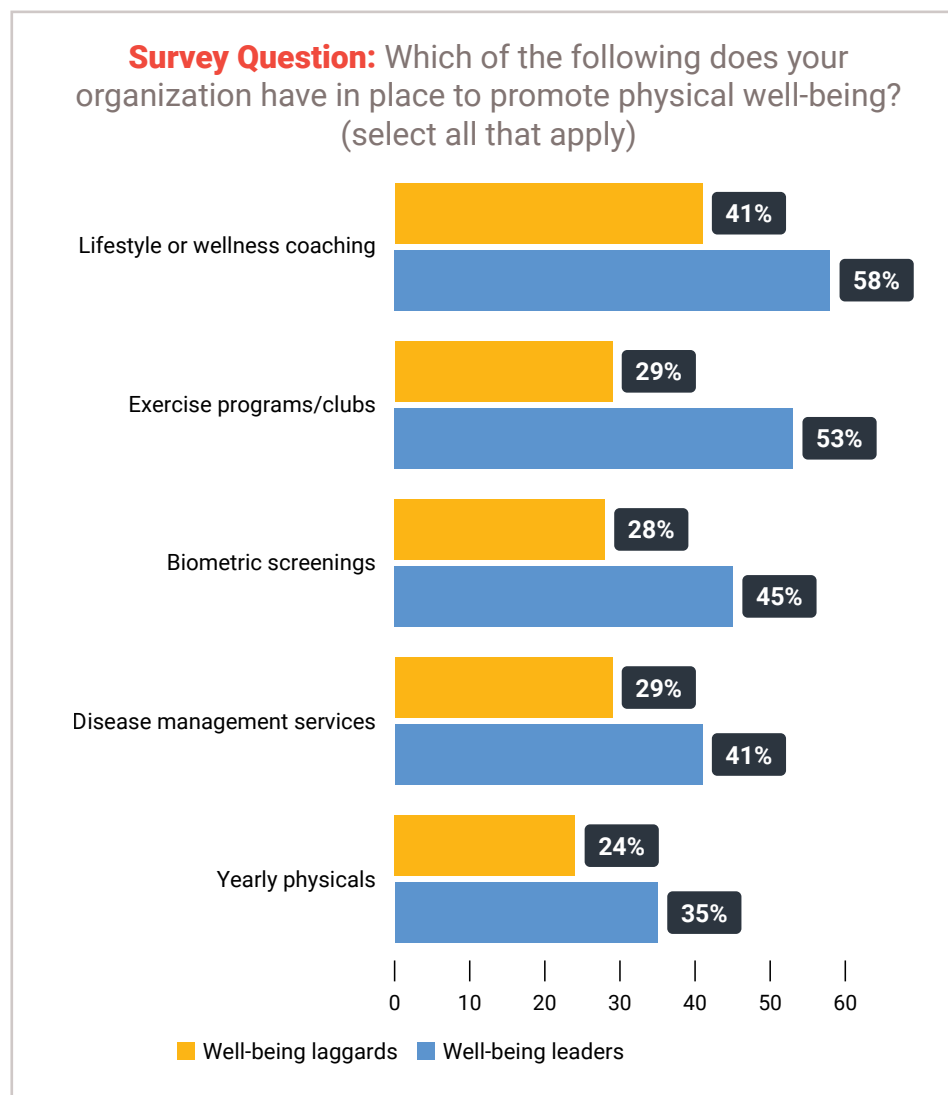
Survey Question: Since the Covid-19 pandemic began, what types of initiatives has your organization used to better secure employee well-being? (select all that apply)





Finding: Leaders offer a more expansive range of programs for enhancing physical well-being

Well-being leaders distinguish themselves by offering a more expansive set of programs intended to improve employee physical well-being. The areas where there are the largest differences include lifestyle and wellness coaching, exercise programs, biometric screenings, disease management and annual physicals.

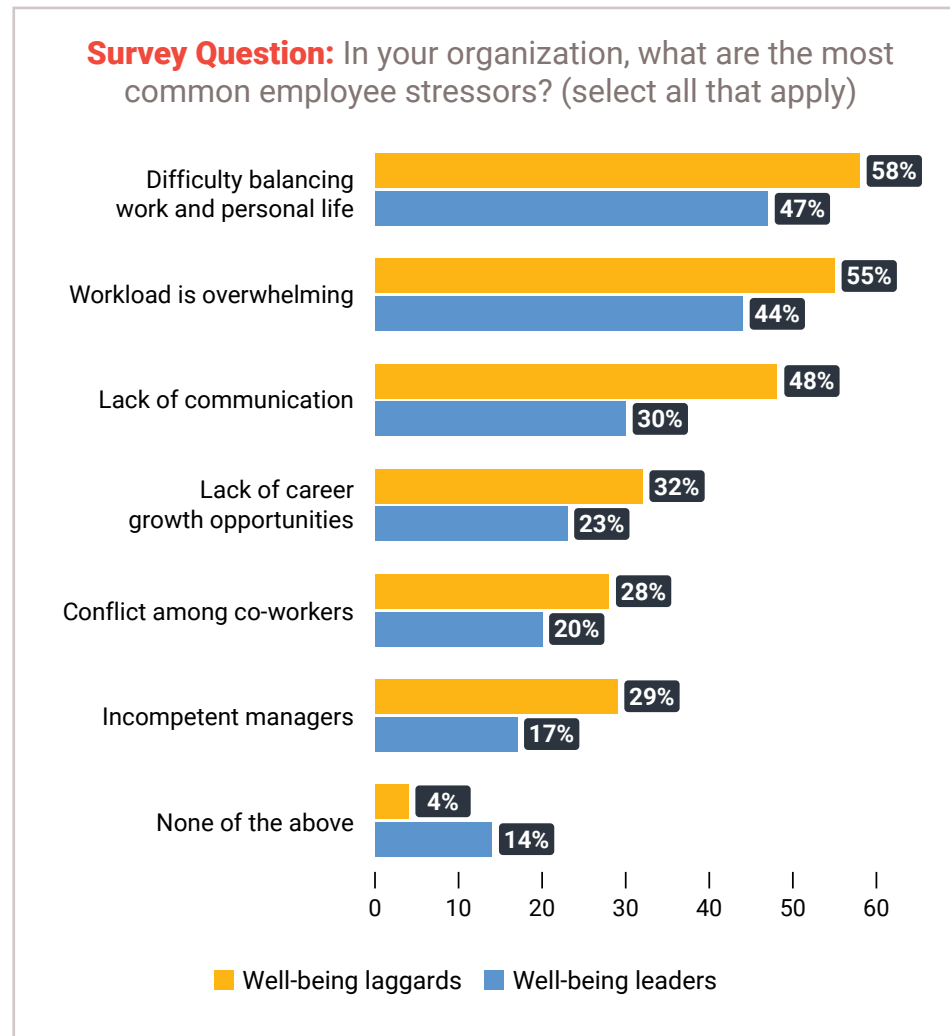




Finding: Leaders report fewer employee stressor than do laggards

Well-being laggards are notably more likely to say their organizations face a range of employee stressors. For example, 58% are likely to cite negative stress around balancing work and personal life, compared to just 47% at well-being leaders. Fifty-five percent of laggard firms report workload is a cause of negative stress among workers, compared to 44% among leaders.

Laggards are often aware that they are underperforming in this area. Only 36% of them agree that their efforts are excellent at helping employees cope with negative stress, compared to 78% of leaders. The results suggest that well-being initiatives can, in fact, mitigate negative stress when they are actively pursued.





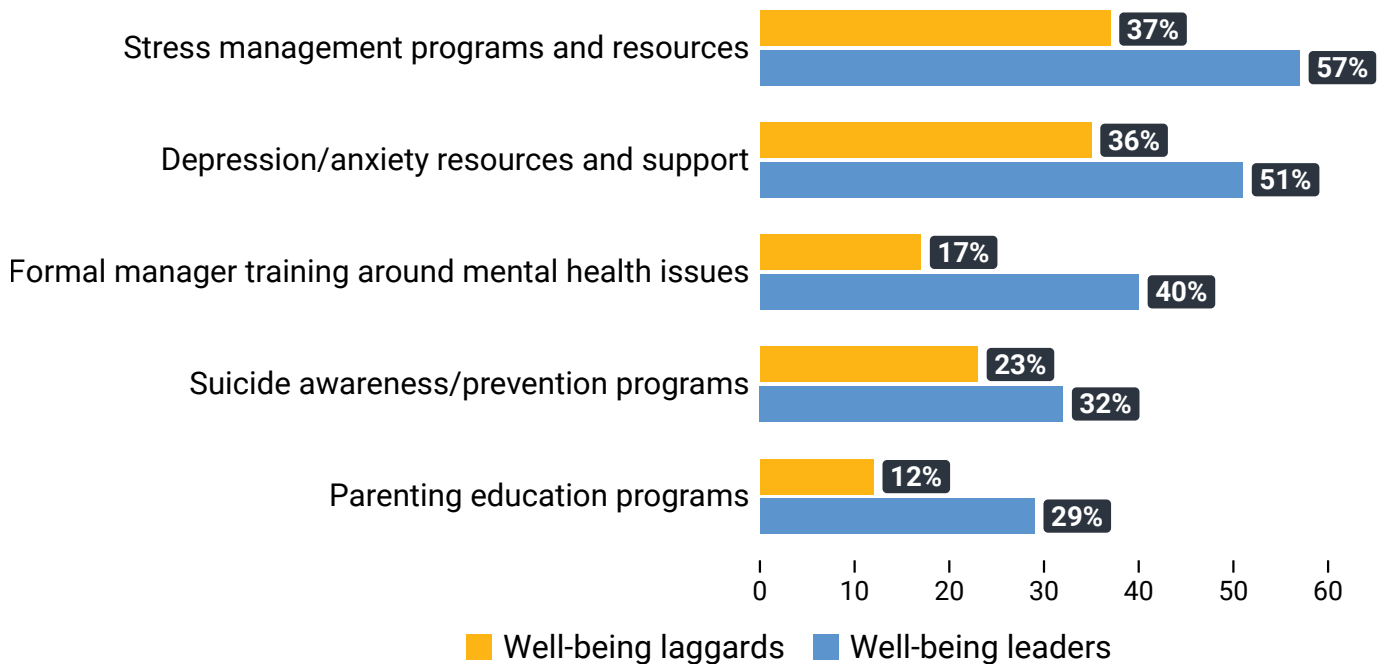
Finding: Well-being leaders place a higher priority on mental health and provide more mental health resources and support

The majority of leaders (83%) agree that employee mental health is among their top five HR priorities. Just half of laggards feel the same way. Significantly more laggards express a certain ambivalence about the priority of employee mental health: 28% neither agree nor disagree, compared to 13% of leaders.

Another key difference: well-being leaders offer notably more mental health support than laggards. For example, more than half of leaders (57%) offer stress management support compared to only 37% of laggards. Forty percent of leaders offer their managers formal training around mental health issues, compared to just 17% of laggards.

All of this seems to pay off as leaders cite fewer problems for employees. Laggards are considerably more likely to cite problems across all categories, especially stress, anxiety, uncertainty and depression.

Survey Question: Which steps does your organization take in regard to employee mental health? (select all that apply)





Finding: Leaders report better outcomes of employee well-being initiatives than do laggards

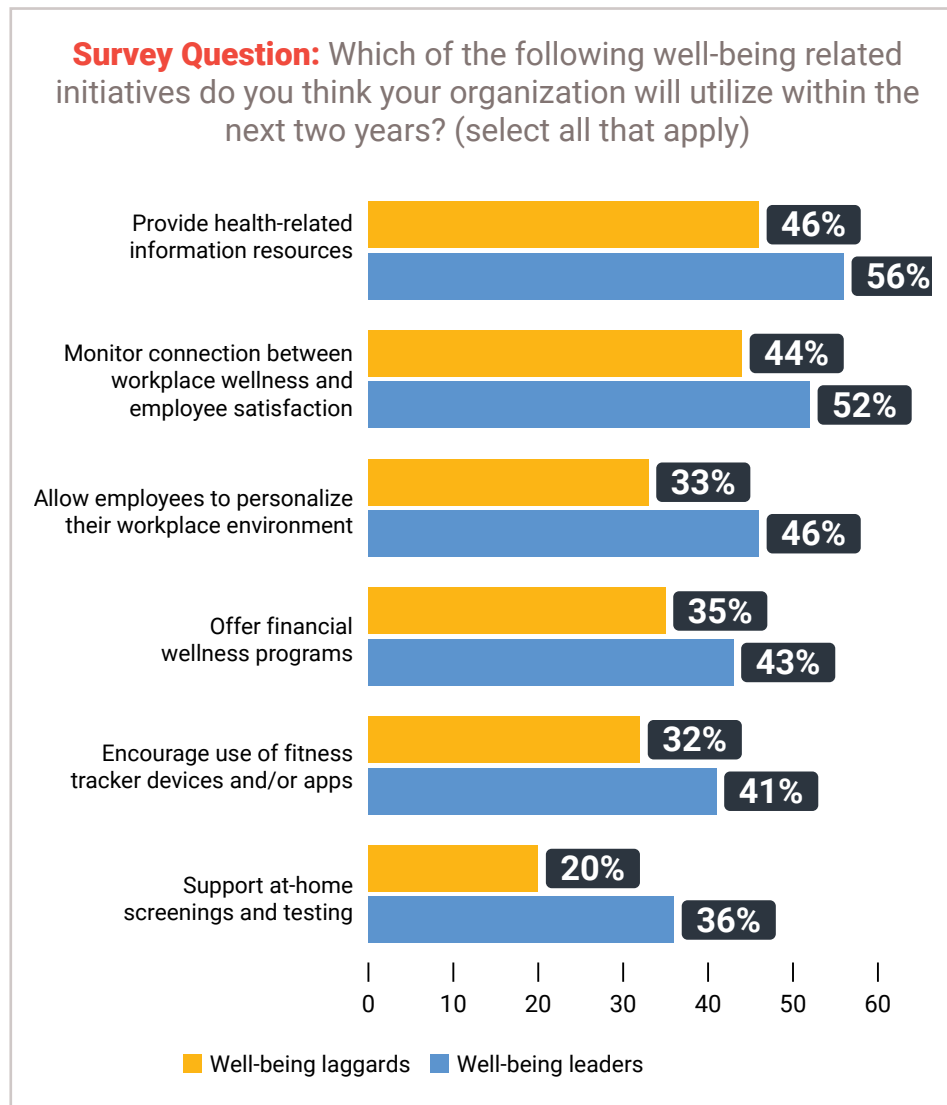
Delving further into the survey results, we see that the priority given to well-being initiatives might lead to better outcomes in a number of other areas. Well-being leaders, for example, report better outcomes than laggards in areas such as improved employee experience and retention, increased engagement and better performance. They also seem more likely to enjoy benefits in terms of lower medical insurance costs, better safety records and fewer disability claims.





Finding: Well-being leaders plan to provide more initiatives within the next two years

Over the next two years, leaders plan to extend many of their efforts to support well-being in various ways. Most notably, they are more likely than laggards to provide health-related information resources, monitor workplace wellness, and allow employees to personalize their environments.





Key Takeaways

Based on the findings in this study, below are recommendations for how organizations can increase the impact of their employee well-being programs.

Key Takeaway 1

Consider taking an expansive view of employee well-being. This study indicates that well-being leaders emphasize a wider range of initiatives than do well-being laggards. Whereas 64% of well-being leader organizations have initiatives aimed at all five types of well-being, only 38% of laggards do. The five types of well-being covered in this report include:

- mental/emotional
- physical
- financial
- social
- well-being related to the workplace environment

Key Takeaway 2

Review employee well-being offerings. Make sure your offerings meet the needs of your workforce and match the standards in your market. Are you offering the programs and initiatives that your employees want and need? Use the audit to find areas in which your organization can step ahead of competitors to gain advantages in engagement, recruitment, retention, employer brand and overall well-being.

Key Takeaway 3

Provide a range of well-being initiatives to help people during the pandemic. In many cases, this will involve mask-wearing policies and remote work opportunities, but well-being leaders tend to offer other support as well. For example, consider these types of support:

- provide informational sources to help employees cope
- provide resources and training to managers so they can better help employees
- implement Covid-19 testing policies
- create regular opportunities for employees to “check in”
- provide employee benefits that are especially likely to help during the pandemic

Key Takeaway 4

Talk to your peers. Reach out to HR colleagues to learn which well-being programs work best in their organizations. There are many options, and organizations can learn from one another, especially those in similar industries. Some organization may, for example, have been especially successful in slowing the spread of the Covid-19 virus in their business locations. What do they do differently?

Key
Takeaway **5**

Train managers to better support employees. This study indicates that training managers is associated with higher success. Managers should know, for example, how to spot well-being and safety concerns and how to support employees. Sometimes this means being able to refer employees to the right employer-supported resources. Sometimes it means being able to implement work practices that promote safety, reduce stress levels, and more.

Key
Takeaway **6**

Consider providing virtual care arrangements and other initiatives focused on physical well-being. Expanded telemedicine and virtual care arrangements have become more common during the pandemic. These often include remote conferencing with medical professionals and remote monitoring of health conditions. Meanwhile, there are various other programs that are not necessarily connected to the pandemic and may help employees after it has ended:

- lifestyle or wellness training
- exercise programs/clubs
- biometric screenings
- disease management services

Key
Takeaway **7**

Take a deeper look at mental health well-being issues. This study finds that mental health issues, especially those related to workplace stress, continue to be a major issue at many organizations. Research by PwC found that barely a third of employees strongly agree that their company successfully addresses well-being when mental health and morale are included.¹⁹ The number is even lower among remote workers. Good practices can potentially pay dividends. An article published by the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* found that 86% employees reported improved performance and lower absenteeism after receiving treatment for depression.²⁰ Given the amount of negative stress and other mental issues reported by the employers in the HR.com survey, a greater focus on these issues have the potential to have a notable impact on the workforce's overall well-being and performance.

Key
Takeaway **8**

Consider and perhaps track the outcomes of well-being programs. Obviously, any metrics must respect employee privacy and regulations, but employers may nonetheless be able to find patterns of overall success. Are well-being initiatives correlated with improved employee experience, retention, engagement and performance? Are safety records improved?

¹⁹ PwC. (2020, November). *Recovery starts with safety and confidence*. Retrieved from <https://www.pwc.com/us/en/library/covid-19/recovery-starts-with-safety-and-confidence.html>

²⁰ Goetzl, Ron Z., et al. (2018, April). Mental health in the workplace. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*. Vol. 60, Issue 4, p 322-330. Retrieved from https://journals.lww.com/joem/Fulltext/2018/04000/Mental_Health_in_the_Workplace__A_Call_to_Action.5.asp



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