

WORKPLACE WELLBEING 2025

From Insight to Impact

PERSPECTIVES FROM HR AND OD LEADERS

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03 Introduction

Key themes & findings:

04 The Challenge Landscape

05 What's working

06 The changing context

07 Measuring what matters

08 If you had a magic wand...

09 Reimagining wellbeing

10 Rebuilding the foundations

11 Conclusion

12 References

Table of Contents

Introduction

03

Background and context

In 2025, workplace wellbeing has moved firmly from a “people issue” to a strategic imperative. With employee health and engagement now directly linked to productivity, retention and organisational performance, leaders are under pressure to ensure their wellbeing initiatives deliver measurable impact ^{1,2,3}

To gain an understanding of how this strategic move is being implemented on the ground, Maria Paviour Consulting combined data collected over 2025 with a series of qualitative interviews conducted with senior HR and Organisational Development leaders exploring the challenges and successes they’re experiencing in relation to workplace wellbeing.

With wellbeing now seen as a driver of organisational performance, this research seeks to identify how far the shift is being realised in practice, and to determine:

- What challenges organisations are facing
- What’s currently working well in terms of supporting people, and achieving tangible outcomes
- What’s affecting their wellbeing strategy and initiatives (either positively or negatively)
- How this data can be used to inform the development of policy frameworks and guidelines for employers across the UK, and have a positive impact on the growth of people and organisations

With thanks

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Who are we?

Maria Paviour’s Optimism Consulting are innovators in the field of workplace performance and wellbeing, using cutting edge neuroscience and psychology to deliver sustainable business growth ^{4,5}. Established in 1994, founder and CEO Maria Paviour is a registered Occupational Psychologist, neuroscientist, bestselling author, and founding member of the Policy Liaison Group on Workplace Wellbeing.

How did we gain the data?

We used data we have been capturing from a variety of corporate and public sector organisations through Cari®, which measures commitment, resilience and brain performance. Fundamentally, the report is based on face to face interviews. The organisations interviewed in our study ranged from 3000-15,000 employees, from the public, private, and education sectors. To understand how these changes and pressures are being experienced in practice, we spoke to senior HR and OD Leaders who could provide detail on the organisation’s current status with regards to wellbeing strategy, challenges, and successes.

1. THE CHALLENGE LANDSCAPE

What challenges organisations are facing.

PREDOMINANT THEMES

Workload/stress and communication (linked to lack of resources), and culture.

Workload/stress, lack of resources, communication

High workload is seen as the primary driver of stress levels, and is due largely to lack of resources. One leader reported “Our biggest challenge is workload. And we can’t do anything about that”, and another “The staff base is shrinking, and people are feeling it”. This aligns with national findings: in a UK employee survey 35% of respondents cited workload pressures as a primary stressor⁶.

In one organisation, workload and culture is driven by billable hours. People don’t feel able to take time out due to pressure, and burnout becomes common²⁰.

Communication was seen as a challenge to being able to support peoples’ wellbeing²⁰. As with workload, this is largely due to lack of resources: no individual, or team, with capacity to get the message out and connect people with wellbeing/support initiatives - or indeed promote a culture of support: “people won’t just seek you out, and I don’t know what we can do to help with that”. Another factor is diverse workforces, with some staff office based, and others ‘out in the field’ and harder to reach through resource-economic channels like email/intranet²⁰.

Insights

It’s evident that political, economic and social factors are at play. Many organisations are still dealing with the after effects of Brexit, the cost of living crisis, and the pandemic. These coalesce to cause ever increasing workloads, which, paired with ever decreasing resources, foster an unsustainable working environment and negative culture²⁰.

‘Billable hours’ provides a clear example of the Cultural Imperative in action. In its simplest terms: what we as leaders measure, drives employee behaviour⁵. Organisational performance metrics drive the culture, and as responsible leaders, we have a duty to ensure that our actions and decisions - what we choose to measure, and prioritise - positively impact upon our employees⁵.

The will to support and to implement change is clearly there, with one leader reporting “We are honest and open about where we are at now - which is at the bottom, and the beginning. And we really are working with staff to co-create an organisation that’s a great place to be.” In the majority of organisations, due to largely external factors, the means are lacking. This is a source of frustration to many of the leaders we interviewed.

“We’re a large organisation, all employees access info in different ways, it’s especially challenging with front-line staff. And we don’t have the resources to get the messages out there effectively.”

2. WHAT'S WORKING? SUCCESSES AND STRENGTHS

What's currently working well in terms of supporting people, and achieving tangible outcomes

PREDOMINANT THEMES

Active staff networks, Leadership commitment, business systems

Active staff networks and support groups

The most consistent response across the organisations interviewed was that peer led networks, and staff support groups, are one of the most effective initiatives they have in place. These groups help to create a sense of belonging, connection, and mutual care²⁰. This in turn builds psychological safety and reduces stigma, fostering authenticity, openness and a shared sense of purpose^{8, 9, 10}.

Leadership commitment and buy-in

Visible leadership commitment is a driver of cultural and behavioural change²⁰. Senior Leaders actively championing wellbeing through open conversations encourages openness among employees: "Behaviour breeds behaviour". One organisation has implemented regular 'in conversation with' sessions, where the Corporate Leadership Team host sessions discussing its learning framework, with staff sharing experiences and work activity; one pillar of the framework is 'Being Healthy and Psychologically Safe'. The transparency in these sessions are normalising wellbeing conversations and signals that wellbeing is a core part of how the organisation operates²⁰ - contributing to an open and supportive culture⁹.

Wellbeing woven into business systems

One organisation described the deeper integration of wellbeing into business as usual as one of their strengths. Psychological safety has been put to the forefront, as a 'pillar' of their learning framework. Day one referrals to Occ health, and self-referrals routes, alongside wellbeing being integrated into performance management, have all contributed to embedding wellbeing into their infrastructure, creating a strong, interlinked foundation of support, rather than a series of 'one-off' initiatives^{10, 11}.

Others reported that repositioning wellbeing under formal business functions had ensured greater visibility and accountability. This structural integration of wellbeing has meant support is more consistent, and easier for staff to access²⁰.

"Before, communication became a bit disjointed, now, its smooth process and joined up."

Insights

Looked at as a whole, the theme across 'what's working well' indicate that supporting staff wellbeing is most effective when it is both people centred, and system embedded. Peer networks provide human connection which builds trust, and reduces stigma. Leadership commitment sets the tone, and encourages open dialogue.

When these are supported by integrated business processes, wellbeing becomes part of how the organisation functions, rather than being seen as 'scattergun' initiatives. Aligning wellbeing support through leadership and infrastructure strengthens engagement and psychological safety, and builds the foundation of a thriving and open culture.

3. THE CHANGING CONTEXT

What's affecting their wellbeing strategy and initiatives (either positively or negatively)?

Across both public and private sectors budget constraints are currently having the biggest impact on wellbeing strategy and delivery.

There is a determination amongst all to “keep wellbeing going” despite the challenges. This reflects a cultural shift: even when resources are limited, wellbeing is not seen as optional.

PREDOMINANT THEMES

Budget constraints, organisational restructuring

“Redundancies... staff morale is low, there's resentment and negativity.”

Budget constraints

Budget freezes and spending reviews are leading to restructures and redundancies. Combined with recruitment freezes these are creating an unsustainable pressure on resources, as reported under 'challenges'. People are leaving and not being redeployed or replaced: “staff morale is low, there's resentment and negativity”.

Restructuring

Restructures have created uncertainty and damaged trust in some organisations. One organisation carried out a 'top-down' restructure under financial pressure. There was little engagement with staff due to external factors, which has caused a trust issue. Leaders are now actively working with staff to rebuild the trust – openly acknowledging issues: “we really are working with staff to co-create an organisation that's a great place to be”

External factors

External environmental factors are also impacting: one organisation reported that recent flooding has had a dual impact: there has been operational disruption to the organisation, alongside creating personal stresses to the staff. There has been a blur to the boundary between work-related and personal/home life stressors¹².

Manager Capability

In some organisations there is disparity between teams: some thrive; others struggle. Engagement survey data indicated that poor management capability was directly linked to lower wellbeing and engagement scores. Consistent management and leadership behaviours play a key role in sustaining wellbeing through challenging times and this highlights the importance of ensuring managers are equipped with the skills they need to support staff¹³.

4. MEASURING WHAT MATTERS

Does your organisation gather preventative information around wellbeing and mental health, or measure the effectiveness of interventions?

PREDOMINANT THEMES

Leading wellbeing indicators rarely measured, data-led interventions valued, acknowledgement of data gap

Lack of proactive, preventative data

Most organisations aren't gathering preventative data on wellbeing/mental health. Some tools (like stress risk assessments) exist, but usage can be inconsistent and insights aren't widely shared/available. One organisation has begun developing a system for recording mental health incidents (for example panic attacks, work related stress) alongside physical incidents, this is still in the early stages¹⁵.

The majority rely on periodic, static, engagement surveys to provide information on staff wellbeing and mental health. This lack of real-time data limits their ability to identify and proactively act on emerging issues, or to evidence the impact of specific interventions.

One organisation we interviewed has been measuring staff wellbeing and performance, and putting into place data-led interventions based on the results. They identified high levels of anxiety in one team, and were able to provide anxiety workshops. In another, issues with relationships were identified, and the organisation were able to provide specific support around this. Positive feedback was received from all on these initiatives: "being data-led, it's been really valuable, being able to focus on what to provide, and who to".

"...being data-led, it's been really valuable, being able to focus on what to provide, and who to".

"The stress risk assessment tool has been successful (gauged by evaluation forms and anecdotal feedback). But there is delay in knowing the impact... It's not shared with the wider organisation."

Leading Wellbeing Indicators are key

The importance of supporting wellbeing is unquestioned. However there is a clear data gap when it comes to knowing exactly how and what organisations need to do: the success of initiatives is rarely quantitatively measured.

Leading wellbeing indicators are key to filling this data gap. These are proactive metrics which predict future outcomes. Rather than lagging indicators (static engagement surveys, post incident reporting) leading indicators provide real-time data which evidences where the organisation is now, and its future path ¹⁴.

5. IF YOU HAD A MAGIC WAND...

If you had no constraints – what would you do/wish for?

PREDOMINANT THEMES

Better communication, connection, and capability

Staff networks

The reinvigoration of staff networks, particularly wellbeing champions/ advocates, and ensuring staff know what support is available to them - and how to access it: “people just don’t know what we have, because we don’t have the capacity and resources to get it out there.” An example in one organisation is the 9-day fortnight initiative. This was set up but is not widely publicised, and as a result it is underused: “it feels like it’s hidden in a cupboard!”

“More face to face initiatives. And more proactive support for managers...”

Better use of data

Better use of data to know what’s needed, and who needs it: “where we need to concentrate our efforts”

Face to face connection

More face-to-face, in person initiatives, to build connection and relationships between team members and across the wider community

Tailored Support

Providing tailored support for people which is proactive, rather than self-service/remote: “We know that works and is important. One size doesn’t fit all.”

Openness to change

An openness to change, at both senior level and within the wider organisation: the willingness to try new things and new ways of working

Training for Managers

Provision of more training for managers to increase their knowledge, skills and confidence in supporting colleagues, with designated time for completing their training. It should be a “clear structured programme so staff know what to do”.

“Better use of data... Tailor support to individuals - what they actually need. We know that works and is important. One size doesn’t fit all.”

In an ideal world...

...Leaders we spoke to indicated they would implement structured, proactive approaches which are supported by data and strong communications, and increase connection and capability within their people. There is a strong desire for openness, to experimentation, and change.

All were clear in their aspirations to create cultures which actively embed wellbeing in how people work, and connect¹⁶.

Reimagining wellbeing: the ideal future

09

Highlighted in our findings is that employee wellbeing in the workplace can't be sustained through isolated initiatives. To see change enacted, and to increase capability and connection, wellbeing must be integrated into every level of the organisation: measured; managed; and modelled. The effectiveness of this approach is evidenced by the Cultural Imperative: what leaders choose to measure drives peoples' day to day behaviour, which fosters the organisation's culture⁵.

Macro level impact

For lasting, sustainable impact at a macro level, we extend the principles of responsible leadership (Paviour, 2025) beyond individual organisations, integrating them into national frameworks and policy. This ensures initiatives are not isolated, but become part of a wider national strategy that supports people and organisations to thrive.

This is encouraged and reinforced through policy frameworks:

- National standards and regulatory guidance require organisations to both track and incentivise the tracking of leading wellbeing indicators, alongside performance, productivity, financials (ESG reporting)^{11, 19}
- Sector specific frameworks that include leading wellbeing indicators in audits/inspections¹⁷
- Gathering of standardised wellbeing metrics on a national scale to support the development of the Wellbeing in the Workplace Maturity Index: real-time, industry benchmarked workplace wellbeing data, accessible to employers and policy makers¹⁸

The creation of an ecosystem

Use of policy frameworks and national standards to make measurement of leading workplace wellbeing indicators a requirement reinforces the right behaviours at every level. The HSE Management Standards for Work-related Stress is expanded into a broader Workplace Wellbeing Measurement Framework which includes psychological safety, belonging, and purpose.

This creates a workplace wellbeing measurement ecosystem, whose data becomes a national driver of cultural change across the UK. Organisations gather real-time wellbeing data, which feeds into national dashboards (including industry benchmarks). Policymakers use this data to track progress, and shape incentives and regulation. Leaders are guided in their business decisions by evidence-based workplace wellbeing maturity frameworks.

An evolving national culture

With workplace wellbeing metrics part of ESG/corporate governance reporting, leaders are tangibly incentivised to prioritise the true driver of sustainable growth: the engagement and commitment of their people¹⁹.

The Cultural Imperative is enacted at a national level: the framework defines what matters; the leaders measure it; the people embody it. Connection and capability build, wellbeing and performance improve, and our culture evolves⁶.

Rebuilding the foundations: the Human Factor in wellbeing leadership

10

As we look ahead to a mature and integrated workplace wellbeing landscape, we must recognise the people who've carried this agenda through turbulent years. HR and OD Leaders have been at the centre of profound change. They have managed the operational complexities of the 2020 pandemic, alongside the emotional fallout for their people, and themselves. They held space for uncertainty and fear, often while navigating their own. The emotional load caused by this hasn't disappeared, and indeed continues to shape how they lead, and how organisations function.

The uniquely complex current environment, caused by the COVID-19 legacy, rapid evolution of hybrid working, skills shortages, economic factors, and a growing awareness of neurodiversity is causing immense pressure on HR, who are expected to rebuild culture, strengthen connections, and deliver performance - in systems still in, and recovering from, trauma. According to a 2025 survey by Ciphir, 94% of HR decision makers reported being affected by workplace stress⁷

Equality of data: financial; and human

To improve and sustain organisational wellbeing, we need to safeguard the wellbeing of those responsible for leading it, and the future of workplace wellbeing must include the future of the HR function itself. To move from reactive fire-fighting to proactive culture shaping, HR needs resources, recognition, and data. We know that people data (engagement, commitment, trust, belonging) are as critical to organisational success as financial data, and equality between HR and Finance functions will ensure that business decisions balance commercial and human sustainability¹⁹.

A cycle of sustainable performance will be supported by this alignment between HR and Finance, driven by three interdependent elements:

- Engagement: ensuring people feel involved, connected, and purposeful.
- Wellbeing: embedding individual and collective wellbeing into daily operations.
- Performance: emerging naturally from the first two, as engaged and healthy teams deliver their best work.

Shaping the future

Activating this cycle relies on senior leaders reflecting on how their own conscious and unconscious behaviours shape their organisation's Cultural Imperative. The signals they send through what they decide to measure and prioritise, defines the development of the culture⁶.

Through alignment of their signals with trust and inclusion, they can create conditions in which people – and the organisation – can thrive.

Conclusion

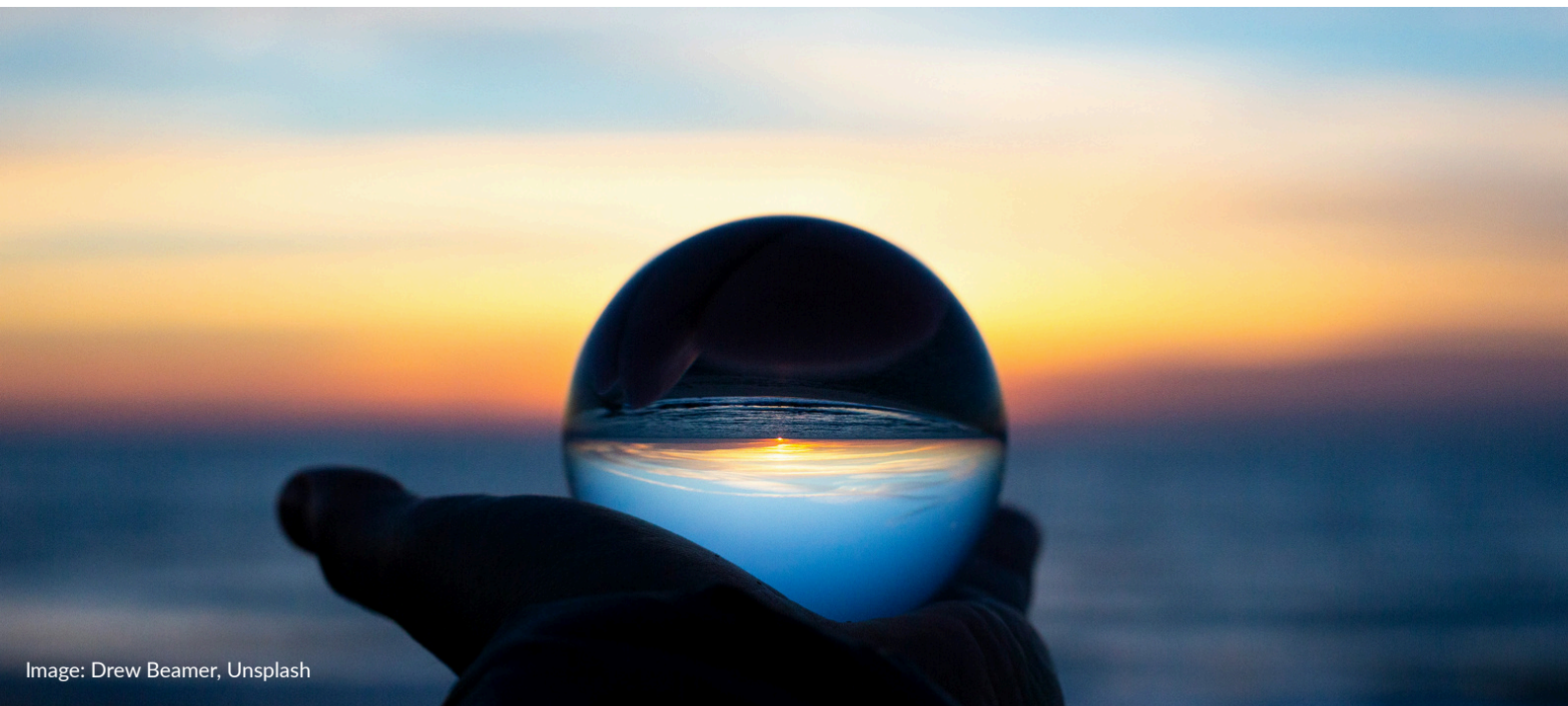
Our research and reflections highlight a common tension: wellbeing is increasingly seen as a strategic priority, but day to day decisions and measures are misaligned.

We know from the Cultural Imperative⁶, that it is what leaders choose to measure, prioritise, and reward that shapes culture: how people behave day to day when no one is watching. Leadership metrics must align with the cultural outcomes they want to see, and this means tracking wellbeing as actively – if not more so – than financial performance.

Quantitative, real-time wellbeing and performance data enables organisations to see whether their stated culture aligns with lived experience. When leaders track wellbeing, engagement, and performance alongside their operational metrics, it signals that people matter. That wellbeing is seen as a driver of success, and not a cost. Policy frameworks which embed these measures into governance (for example, ESG, or ISO 45003) become drivers of the desired culture^{17 18 19}.

Under pressure, many senior leaders default to a 'scarcity mindset': cutting, pausing, and freezing. This can unintentionally create a negative cultural imperative - driving fear, disengagement, and burnout. The choices leaders make in these times of constraint (what they protect, measure, prioritise) determine whether the organisation's culture contracts or thrives.

To drive a positive cultural imperative, leaders must consciously choose actions that reinforce trust, connection, and belonging. Open leadership, accountability, and consistent data contribute to building environments where both people and organisations grow, sustainably.



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