

Opening the Conversation: Mental Wellbeing in Market Research



Forewords

There has never been a more crucial time to talk about mental health at work.

Welcome to the report from the inaugural Canadian Research Insights Council (CRIC) Mental Wellbeing in Market Research survey, made possible by Opinium. Mental health is a very important part of our overall well-being, yet, as the findings show, many of us remain uncomfortable talking openly about it, especially in the workplace. Mental health is a growing concern and one that has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

CRIC is grateful to Opinium for conducting their workplace mental wellbeing audit to support the goal of accelerating change in our sector. This research is part of an expanding global study with the MRS, Insights Association, the Research Association New Zealand and ESOMAR also taking part.

We are also thankful to those from our industry who were willing to share their experiences and participate in this important research. Our goal is to share these results to encourage leaders and staff to begin conversations that will make a real difference in the wellbeing of all those who work in our industry.

John Tabone, CAIP – CAO, Canadian Research Insights Council

The extra stress and strain that Covid-19 has placed on the mental health of the world is something that none of us could have predicted. It has turned our worlds upside down in terms of working practises and day-to-day living, and this has undeniably impacted mental wellbeing.

After developing the first workplace mental wellbeing audit with Warwick University Medical School in 2019, we were so delighted when the Canadian Research Insights Council agreed to partner with us and help us take the audit further afield in its second year.

Our research has found that the majority of researchers in Canada have struggled with their mental health to varying degrees in the last 12 months. Though despite this impacting so many of us, the culture around talking about mental health problems in the workplace still needs considerable work. Employers have a vital role to play in supporting the mental health of their teams and fostering a culture of openness and acceptance.

We are extremely proud to be able to share this report with you, which we hope will accelerate change in market research teams across Canada. As you'll see throughout the report, we've uncovered some of the key issues companies need to address, and various initiatives that may help them in doing so, as well as the impact of Covid-19 on mental wellbeing. Addressing mental wellbeing at work may seem like a mammoth task, but it's a journey; taking that first step in the right direction will kick start wider organisational change, benefitting everyone involved.

Giulia Prati – Director, Opinium

Summary of Findings



9 in 10 have struggled with their mental health to some degree in the previous 12 months



32% of those experiencing mental health issues took time off work to recover



Workload and deadlines are the biggest stressors for researchers



Junior employees feel less confident talking about mental health at work



47% would like to see their employer introduce “duvet” days



44% feel reluctant to come back to work



Three quarters feel more relaxed working from home



3 in 10 worry about the long-term impacts of home working

Introduction

We designed our Workplace Mental Wellbeing Audit to help organisations understand the mental health of their employees and in turn take steps to help them. This year, we partnered with the Canadian Research Insight Council (CRIC) to survey 122 researchers between July and August. We want to look specifically at the mental wellbeing of those working in the market research industry in Canada and how the pandemic has affected their mental health.

The report covers an overview of our findings including the top stresses market researchers in Canada face, and how employees feel when discussing mental wellbeing in the workplace. We also provide several suggestions for employers to improve the wellbeing of their staff.

Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale

A key element of our audit is the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale; a rigorous and scientific method designed by the University of Warwick with funding from NHS Health Scotland. Looking at the scores of the scale, the mental wellbeing of an individual can be determined in terms of whether it falls above or below the national average. The scale enables us to quantify mental wellbeing, thus promoting wider understanding of mental wellbeing. A further use of the scale is to encourage effective improvement of mental wellbeing for the individual, by tracking scores over time, and to equip organisations and wider society to support the enhancement of mental wellbeing.

Mental wellbeing in the workplace

Almost 9 in 10 struggled with their mental health in the last 12 months but only a third took time off to recover

Almost 9 in 10 (86%) of Canadian researchers have struggled with their mental health to some degree in the past 12 months.

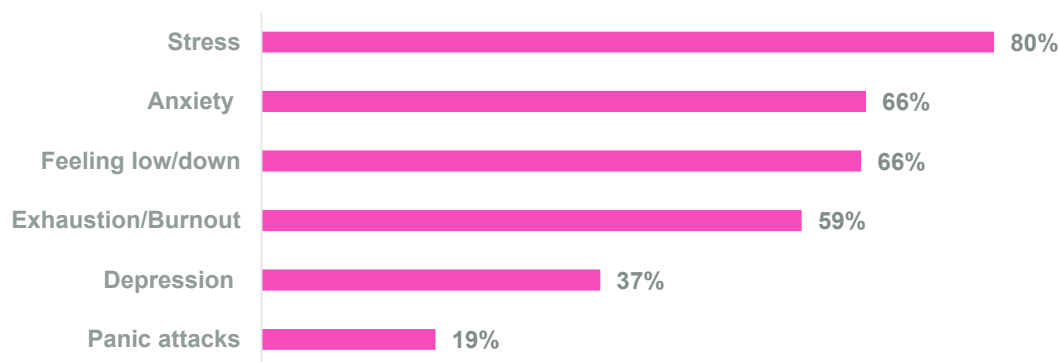
The top mental health problem was stress, mentioned by as many as four out of five respondents (80%). Out of them, two thirds (66%) reported that their stress had at least a slight negative impact on their work, and just 7% thought it had no impact at all. Yet Canadian researchers also faced other mental health issues. Common ones included anxiety and feeling low/down (both at 66%) and exhaustion/ burnout (59%). When asked about their feelings over the past two weeks, as many as 17% of respondents declared having rarely felt cheerful. These issues directly impact life in the workplace: three in ten (31%) of those who experienced a mental health problem in the past year said it caused a significant negative impact on their work.

Worryingly, of those who struggled with their mental health, only a third (32%) took time off to rest or recover, and just one in five experiencing stress did (20%). More than three out of five researchers (63%) mentioned they had too much work to take time off, highlighting the need to spark

conversations about the importance of mental wellbeing in the workplace. Young people are especially vulnerable, as 76% of under 35s considered they had too much work to take time off to recover.

These results mirror the low percentage of respondents who took time off for a physical health issue (31%) and outline a general difficulty for employees to stay off work.

Most common mental health problems experienced by respondents in the last 12 months



Workload and deadlines are the most common causes of stress among researchers

One in five (21%) market researchers find their job highly stressful (giving it a rating of 8-10, with 10 being extremely stressful). In terms of the causes of this stress, the three biggest reasons were workload (57%), impending deadlines (51%), and the risk of projects going wrong (43%).

Which, if any, of the following cause you to feel stressed at work? (Top 6)



When we asked how often researchers experience these stresses, 71% said they experience tight deadlines/targets often or all of the time. Similarly, 53% said they experience heavy workloads and 52% experience pressure often or all of the time.

Perceptions of wellbeing and support vary significantly by age and seniority

Seniority

More senior employees tend to be more optimistic about how their company handles the mental health and wellbeing of their employees. When struggling with mental health, 72% of senior level employees feel that they would be supported in their workplace compared with 43% of middle and junior employees, a 29% difference between the groups.

Senior level employees also believe their companies take mental health more seriously than their more junior counterparts. Three-quarters (74%) of higher-ups agreed that their workplace takes employee wellbeing seriously, while middle level and lower employees were less certain – under half (48%) felt this was the case.

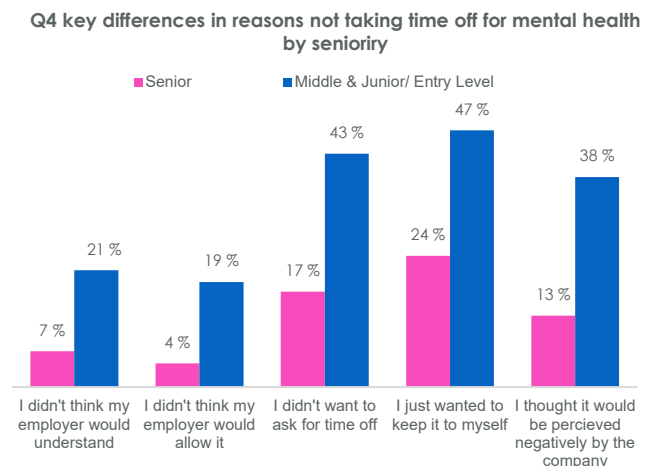
Age

A large barrier for younger employees to feel more supported with their wellbeing is that they are much less likely to know who to turn to when they are having trouble – and less likely to feel they have anyone to turn to at all. Just 32% of respondents under age 35 agreed that they could openly talk with their colleagues about mental health – compared to nearly three-fifths of those over 35 (59%). Twice the percentage of those under 35 agreed that they would not know who to turn to if they were struggling with mental health than those who were older than 35 (42% vs 20%)

Mental wellbeing needs greater support from more senior, experienced, and stable employees

The most common reason cited by all marketing research employees surveyed as for why they did not take time off when they are struggling with mental health issues was that they had too much to do (70%). Second most, people said their mental health issue wasn't bad enough to warrant a day off (60%). On these reasons for pushing through the struggle, both senior and junior level employees could agree.

But significant differences in reasons cited appear between position levels when looking deeper. One of the next most common reasons for junior and middle level employees to “just keep going” is that they didn't want to ask for time off. Two-in-five (43%) employees who didn't take time off for mental health issues cited this concern, over double that of senior employees (17%). One fifth of employees who didn't take time off didn't think their employer would understand (21%) or that they would allow it (19%) – whereas only 7% and 4% of senior level employees cited these two concerns, respectively.



Most significantly, 38% of middle and junior employees who didn't take time off for mental health felt doing so would be perceived negatively by the company. Only 13% of senior level employees in the same position felt that way – almost one-third as many.

All of this data points to a stark divide in perceptions of support and attitudes surrounding wellbeing in the workplace between age groups and seniority levels in the company. This underscores the importance of higher ups listening to and actively engaging with younger or more junior employees to understand how they are doing and express concern.

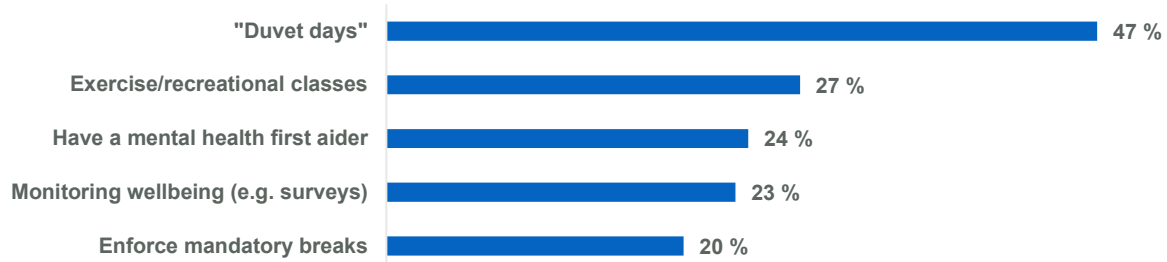
Employees want more employer-sanctioned breaks for wellbeing

The most common program offered to employees to support their wellbeing – unsurprisingly given the pandemic – has been to allow employees to work from home. Nearly three-in-five (59%) insights employees are aware they are offered flexible working hours, and over half (55%) have access to an employee assistance program.

When insights employees were asked what programs they want from their employers to promote wellbeing, the most popular response (47% of respondents) was “duvet days”: a program whereby employees would be free to take a given day off from work if they felt less than well. This would allow many employees a company-sanctioned break when they might otherwise be fearful of voicing concerns about their mental health to be granted time off.

Some other of the most hoped-for programs for wellbeing include exercise classes (27%), a mental health first aider (24%), and pulse surveys to monitor employee wellbeing (23%). Similar in theme to the employer-sanctioned time off with duvet days, one-in-five (20%) would also like to see their employer enforce mandatory breaks.

Q22. Top 5 wellbeing programs employees would like introduced by their companies



Impact of Covid-19 on wellbeing

Throughout 2021, coronavirus has continued to strongly impact the mental and physical wellbeing of researchers. On a positive note, 79% of the Canadians surveyed consider that the pandemic has been well managed by their company, and more than nine out of ten (91%) felt their employer has been supportive, with only 1% feeling they had not been supportive at all.

Three quarters feel more relaxed working from home, but three in ten worry about long-term mental health impacts

A notable benefit from coronavirus has been the ability to work from home. More than nine out of ten (94%) Canadian researchers have been working from home since the pandemic, versus 44% before it. The new arrangement has been welcomed by a large majority of respondents, as 94% wanted to continue it in some capacity after lockdowns ended. Working from home offers diverse benefits to those surveyed and can have a positive impact on their mental health. Almost three quarters (72%) feel more relaxed and 65% saw their mental health improve as they did not have to commute anymore. More than half of respondents (56%) consider working from home improved their work/life balance and 44% declared it has increased their mental wellbeing.

However, a third of those surveyed (34%) reported homeworking had decreased their mental wellbeing, hinting at a more nuanced picture. The biggest drawbacks mentioned were the increasing difficulty to draw a line between work and rest, and the difficulty to spend time outside for more than half of researchers (53% for both). Working from home could bring added pressures, as 47% felt they were working longer hours, with more than 52% of women feeling this way against 43% of men.

Working from home can also induce feelings of isolation, experienced by almost half (48%) of respondents. More than a third (36%) declared that they were struggling to stay in contact with their colleagues and three in ten (30%) are worried about the long-term impacts of home working on their mental health.

A few quotes from researchers capture these ambivalent feelings:

'Working from home has been a positive thing but doing it all the time for such a long period can be hard at times. It feels stale by now. Like I am waiting for something to change.'

'We are often expected to stay late (because we don't have to commute) or work overtime (because we are already at home). Other colleagues have responsibilities to children, parents, family, etc. so they may be working at odd hours of the day, but this also means we get messages in our inbox at all times of the day.'

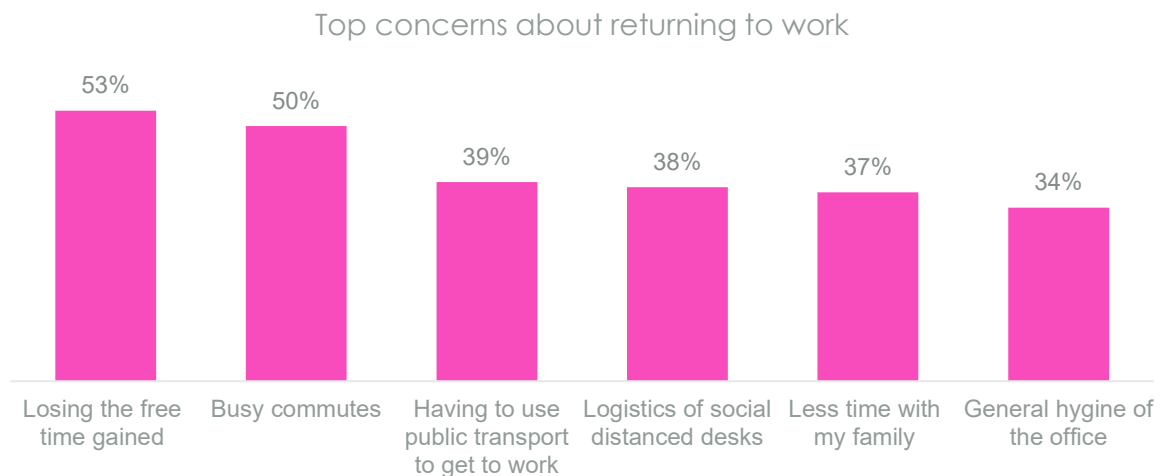
'It's just different. I like the idea of working with others and having hallway chats, and lunch together. In short, I miss the social aspects of working at an office.'

As restrictions ease, employers must strive to improve the mental wellbeing of their employees. The impacts of Covid-19 at work are still very visible, as only 7% of employees declare having no concerns about getting back to the office. More than half (53%) are worried about losing the free time they gained working from home, indicating employers should find the right balance between avoiding isolation and preventing work overloads.

Losing the free time gained when working from home is the biggest concern

When we asked researchers who worked from home how they felt about returning to the office, 45% said they felt anxious and 44% said they felt reluctant.

Above all, researchers are most concerned about losing the free time they gained working from home (53%), the return of busy commutes (50%), and having to use public transport (39%) – as shown in the table below.



Employees will need to ensure that as we start to return to work, they provide a way for their staff to take alternative travel options and that flexible working hours are in place. As some still feel nervous about going back to the office, employers need to adopt an individual approach when it comes to returning, to ensure all employees feel safe and at ease when transitioning back to office life.

Authors



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