



Missing the Mark

Why Staff are Rejecting Your Help (and what they really want)

New Kooth data reveals the status of workforce mental wellbeing and the support UK employees really want from their workplace

A foreword from Tim Barker, CEO



UK employers are investing in mental wellbeing - but in the wrong places.

There is a serious mismatch between what support workforces want and what they're being offered. And this discrepancy is hitting wellbeing, productivity, staff retention, morale and growth; the stats around absenteeism, presenteeism and staff churn will be all too familiar to anyone reading this report.

Through our clinically led research, we found employees want easy access to help, not generic and opaque systems. They want anonymity so they can talk without judgement and stigma. They don't want waiting lists, thresholds to qualify for support, or a fixed number of counselling sessions. They also don't want to have to pay to get the extra help they feel they need which is not currently available through their employer.

There is also a pressing need for great communication around what, if anything, is available to staff: we found in 40% of cases, employers are paying for support that no-one even knows exists.

This lack of awareness, along with the stigma often associated with asking for help could explain why fewer than half of the employees taking part in our research would seek support at work. Worryingly, 72% say they always work or work most of the time while they're unwell.

We also found 37% of respondents showing moderate to high levels of burnout, with half displaying signs of being at risk of depression. With 62% reporting some level of anxiety, there is an obvious risk that a higher percentage of workers will progress into more acute areas of need.

Unsurprisingly then, over half of employee participants want their employers to do more to identify, understand, and meet their needs. Just 18% think their employer is doing enough to support mental health. Through this report we uncover the stark picture of staff working while unwell and feeling unable to access support - but also offers a comprehensive view of the help they do want.

It's time to understand the issue before presenting the solution. Ask your workforce how they are and what they need. Work with clinical experts to advise on the best way to target the big issues impacting your organisation and hurting your people.

At Kooth Work, we believe mental health and wellbeing helps organisations and those who work there to truly flourish.

Tim Barker, CEO, Kooth

Our Kooth Work digital platform and tools can help you measurably improve the mental health of your workforce.

Missing the mark

Employers are missing the mark at least third of the time when it comes to mental wellbeing:

Communication gap:
40% of employees don't know what support is available to them

Perception gap:
1 in 3 employees don't feel their workplace supports their needs

Support gap:
employees are 42% under-served by their employer support options



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1. Feedback on workplace support culture

To get an understanding of where organisations may be going wrong, we started by looking at what employees had to say about their workplace culture.



Most employees believe their workplace cares, but still wouldn't access support



6 in 10

respondents agree to some extent that their mental health is important to their company

Thankfully, in the UK we are seeing greater awareness and acknowledgement of employee mental health amongst employers. This is underlined by market research showing [90% of employers investing more into workplace wellbeing](#) in 2022, and over [70% of employers taking on new initiatives](#).

In fact, all of the key worker employees who participated in the research indicated that their employer had mental wellbeing support options in place.

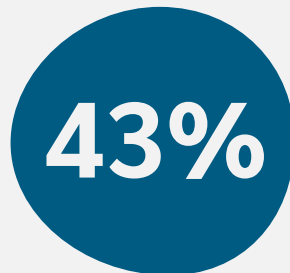
It is for this reason we believe such a high proportion (60%) of employees agreed that their company thought their mental health was important.

We also found a compassionate culture around wellbeing where employees are likely to support one another.

Many workplaces are clearly taking well-intentioned steps to promote mental health, and this is being heard by employees. But well-intentioned actions don't always correlate to well-supported employees, with many respondents not actually seeking help. **Why is this?**



of respondents would offer help to a colleague struggling with mental health



of respondents agree to some extent that they'd access support at work

Communication, comfortability, and culture are barriers



40%

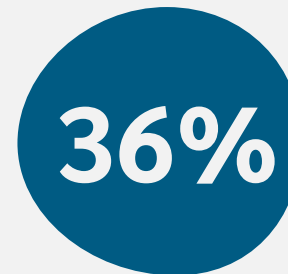
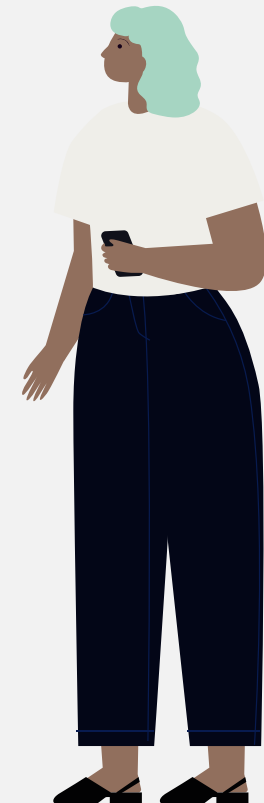
of respondents don't know what support is available to them

Lack of effective internal communication around mental health continues to be a critical barrier to achieving the goal of better workforce mental health. Many employees are unsure of what support is available, feeling unsupported before they've even reached out for help.

And very often, poor communication goes hand in hand with mental health stigma and people not feeling comfortable speaking up.

“There needs to be better communication around mental health and making people aware of it”
anonymous respondent

“I just want mental health support to be made known without having to ask”
anonymous respondent



of people disagree to some extent that they would approach someone at work for support

For years, discussing wellbeing has been taboo, with [employees fearing they may be treated differently or that such a discussion may influence future opportunities](#). When we make employees go digging for support, we reinforce the idea that mental health shouldn't be spoken about at work. Yet when organisations effectively and regularly communicate around wellbeing, they're likely to reap the benefits - like [improved workplace morale](#) and increased [productivity](#) - of a positive and open wellbeing culture.

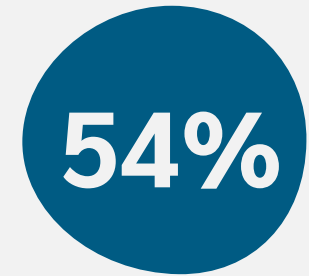
While we are seeing improvements in tackling stigma, our data shows that there is still some way to go.

Employee needs aren't being met

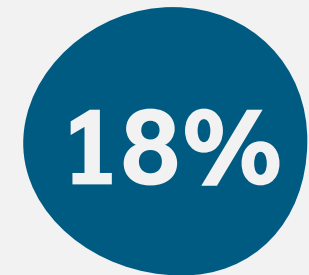


As well as stigma and a lack of communication, it became clear in the data that many employees don't turn to workplace support because it simply doesn't support their needs.

And when people don't feel supported, wellbeing suffers. Figure 1 shows that those who reported not having a supportive workplace pattern had a worse wellbeing score overall and were in the "at risk" group, highlighted by the red threshold on the wellbeing measure ([WHO-5](#)).

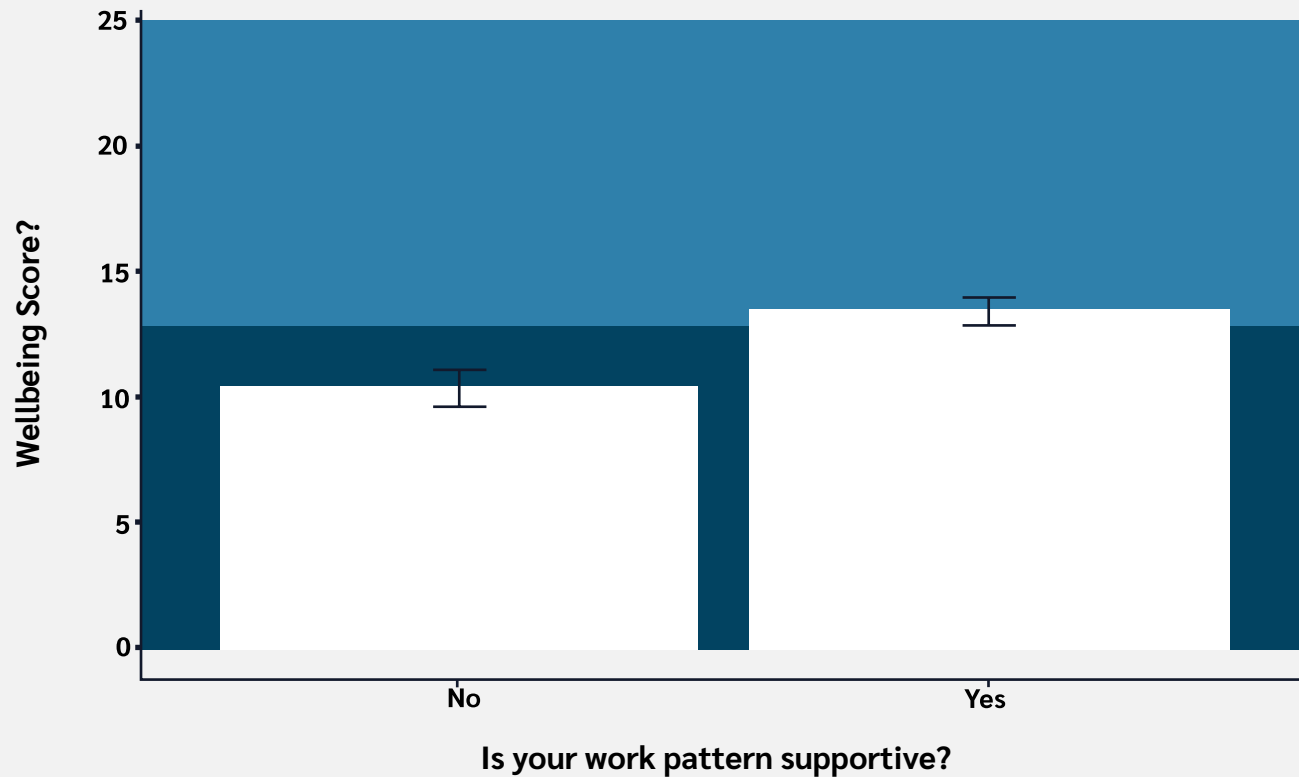


agree to some extent that their workplace must do more



of workers think their workplace does enough to support mental health

Figure 1. Chart showing the impact of supportive workplace patterns on mental wellbeing score.



So, despite increased investment, mental health support options still aren't resonating with employees. To be able to make more effective choices, it's crucial to first understand where to focus your efforts.

2. A benchmark of employee mental health

To be able to effectively tailor support, it's crucial for organisations to assess their workforce needs, looking below the surface to gain visibility and a clearer understanding of:

- Workforce mental health status and its impact on overall performance
- Hidden risks and presenting issues
- Factors influencing mental health both in and out of the workplace

Here's what the research found:



Employees aren't yet reaching their full potential



43/56

Overall, employees scored 43 out of a maximum of 56 on the Flourishing Scale.

To provide a holistic view of workforce mental wellbeing, the Flourish Mental Health Check includes a clinical scale to measure the mental wellbeing of employees.

Using the [Flourishing Scale](#), we measured both employee positive psychological states and “eudaimonic wellbeing” - referring to how much fulfilment, growth, and richness a person deems their life to have.

The higher the score, the more employees have the potential to flourish.

As we will see later, seemingly healthy looking Flourishing scores do not mean that a workforce is not susceptible to negative mental health and risks.

The use of an established flourishing measure is distinctive as we not only look at deficit and symptom-based wellbeing scales, but also positivist states, providing a more holistic mental health check for employees.

Ultimately, we know that [employees who feel supported in the workplace are much more likely to flourish](#), and be fulfilled. And that flourishing employees are much more able to [fill job demands to their best ability](#).

Whilst the average Flourishing scale score was good, there is still evidence within this report that there is plenty of headroom for workforces to achieve their full potential. Employers can support this by building on positive areas of their mental wellbeing and addressing the negative factors.

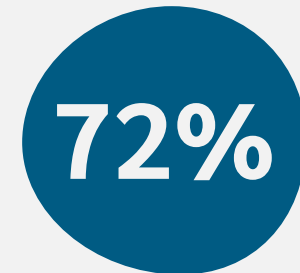
There are other factors that influence the mental health of the workforce, all of which can have a direct impact on business performance, such as talent retention, absenteeism, and presenteeism:



would consider changing jobs to a company with better mental health support



of the workforce have taken time off in the past year due to mental health



of respondents work always or most of the time whilst unwell

Anxiety, burnout, and depression are still prominent



50%

of people show signs of being at risk of **depression**

Our research found high levels of anxiety, depression, and burnout; these findings are stark and cannot be ignored.

i) Anxiety risk levels

Using the [GAD-7](#) assessment screening for Generalised Anxiety Disorder, nearly two-thirds of employee respondents exhibited some concerning signs of anxiety. More specifically, 48% of this group fell into the moderate to high risk category.

1 in 10 employees are considered to have severe levels of anxiety.

We will see later what factors are most likely contributing to employee anxieties.

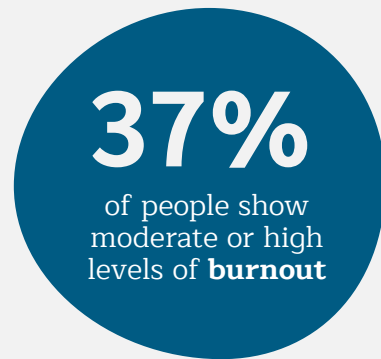
ii) Burnout prevention is essential

It is concerning that 37% of workers show signs of burnout, with 4% being considered a high risk using the [Copenhagen Work Burnout Inventory](#).

A workforce in the grip of burnout suffers from high levels of absence and presenteeism, creating greater stress and anxiety on the rest of your workers.

Burnout is a workplace specific phenomenon; its ability to creep up on a workforce if it goes unchecked makes it a particular threat to your organisation and staff mental health.

It requires effective early intervention and preventative actions to prevent it spreading through your workplace.

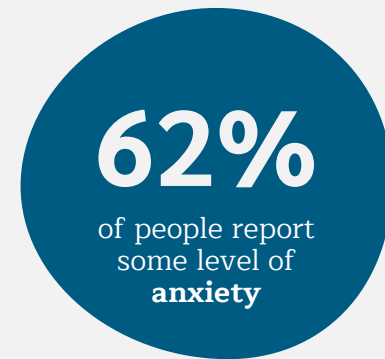


iii) A higher than anticipated risk of depression

Burnout and depression are closely interlinked. It is unsurprising to see that half of UK employees showed that they are at risk of depression.

Using the [WHO-5](#) Index, 50% of respondents scored below 13, a clear indicator that a high percentage of employees should seek mental health testing for depression - and that employers should make access to a professional assessment readily available.

Key worker and [frontline sectors](#) such as **human health and social work, education, and public defence** are most at risk of anxiety, [burnout](#), and depression. These issues also impacted some respondents more than others, with women and 18-24-year-olds most likely to report experiencing mental health concerns.



The workplace is partly to blame for ill mental health

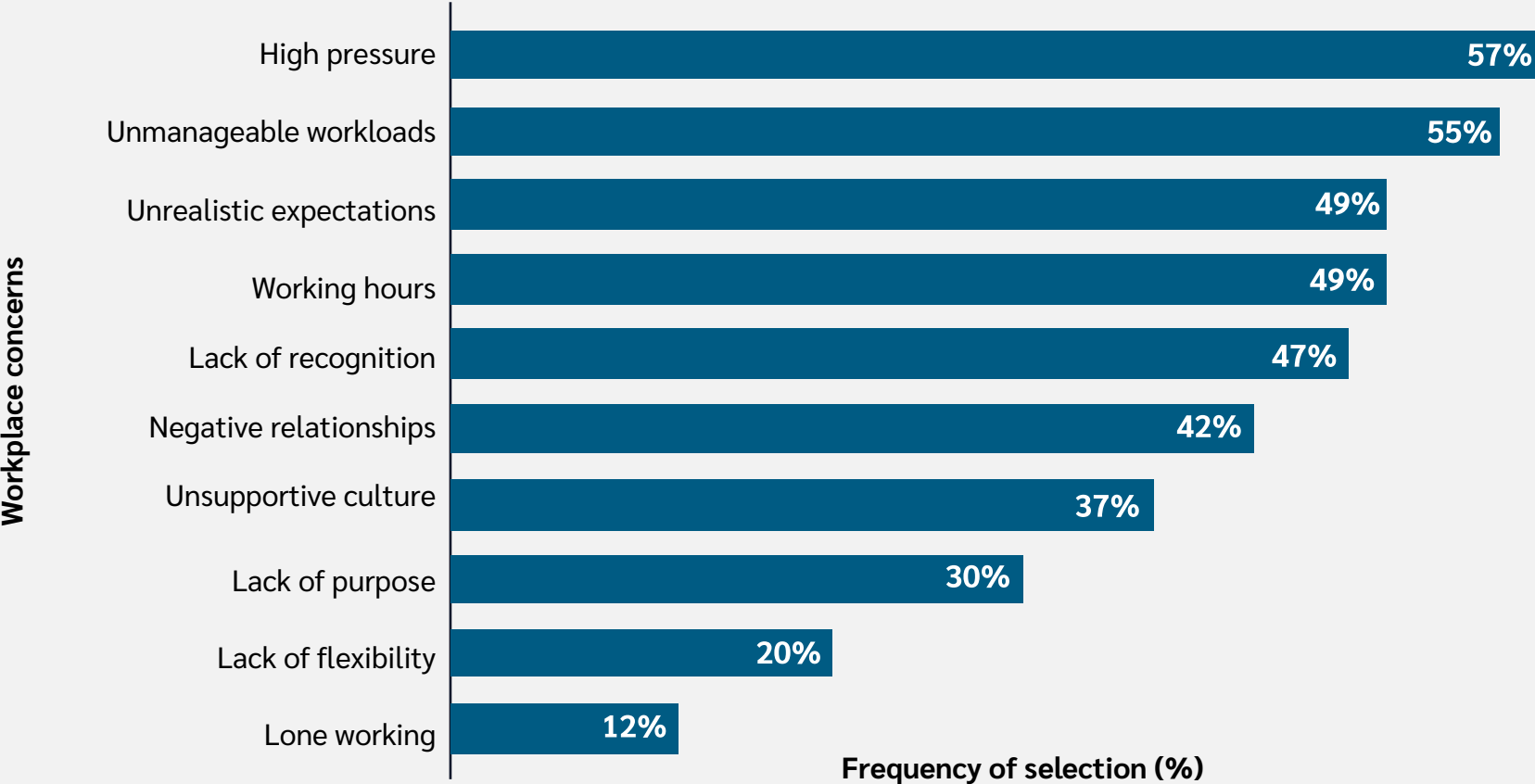


Flourish Mental Health Check also identifies the factors leading to poor wellbeing so that employers can identify where to invest. Respondents reported the workplace can often play a part in mental ill health - something which many employers are aware of.

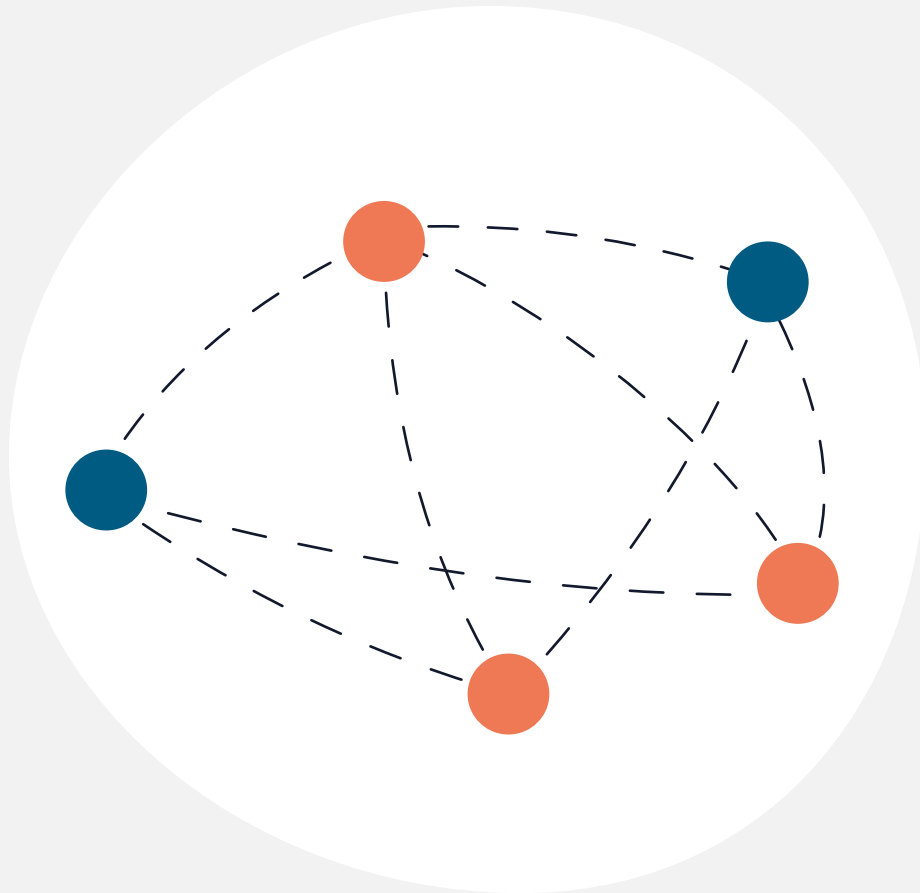
Amongst these respondents, 25-34-year-olds and women were most likely to report that work had a negative impact.

Delving deeper into why the workplace was having a negative effect, several factors were consistent across a high proportion of the employees surveyed, with high pressure, unmanageable workloads, and unrealistic expectations taking the top spots (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Chart showing the workplace factors that respondents reported as leading to poor mental wellbeing



Employee mental wellbeing interlinks workplace and personal life



But it's no longer enough to just focus on preventing work from being a negative causal factor.

Employees each have individual components and experiences that make up their mental health. It's impossible for these experiences to be compartmentalised around working hours. At the core of our Flourish Mental Health Check is this view that mental health is holistic; we ask people about their wider lives to give employers an idea of what other factors are at play in employee wellbeing.

With women, 18-24 year olds, and those on low income wages (below £19,999 per annum) sitting at the most severe end of the spectrum.

With many respondents reporting up to multiple events (up to 11+), presenting a risk factor for mental health issues. When compounded with financial stress or hardship, there is an even higher risk of mental health issues. We have previously seen that this at risk group are less likely to seek support face-to-face (read Kooth's Stressful Life Events report [here](#))

With over two thirds of these respondents also reporting they have experienced discrimination in the workplace setting.

ACEs are traumatic encounters that occur under age 18. They can be single events or prolonged threats to a child or young person's safety, and security, and are often categorised into three areas: abuse, neglect, and household challenges. ACEs can impact a person throughout their life, so it's important for workplaces to be trauma informed.



73%

of respondents are stressed about their financial situation

71%

of respondents have experienced at least one stressful life event

74%

of those who experienced discrimination agreed it negatively impacted their mental health

1 in 3

respondents have had an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE)

Clinical view: The unbreakable interplay between home and workplace mental health



If we are asking people to bring their whole self to work, we have to be able to support them. There are many possible factors at play.

If someone experiences discrimination, for example, this can significantly undermine their sense of self and belonging and lead to the experience of mental health difficulties.

Workplaces that are aware of these contextual and personal factors can ensure that they actively promote inclusivity and diversity. Knowing about these factors can also mean that employers can identify and support (or signpost) individuals much sooner.

Dr Brian Rock
Clinical Director
Kooth

3. What support do employees want?

The final and most crucial part of the Flourish Mental Health Check asks employees how they want to be supported and how their needs can be met. Employee respondents were asked what factors of workplace wellbeing are deemed most important to them and found three key themes:



Anonymity really matters



71%

feel that anonymity and confidentiality is most important to them when accessing mental health support

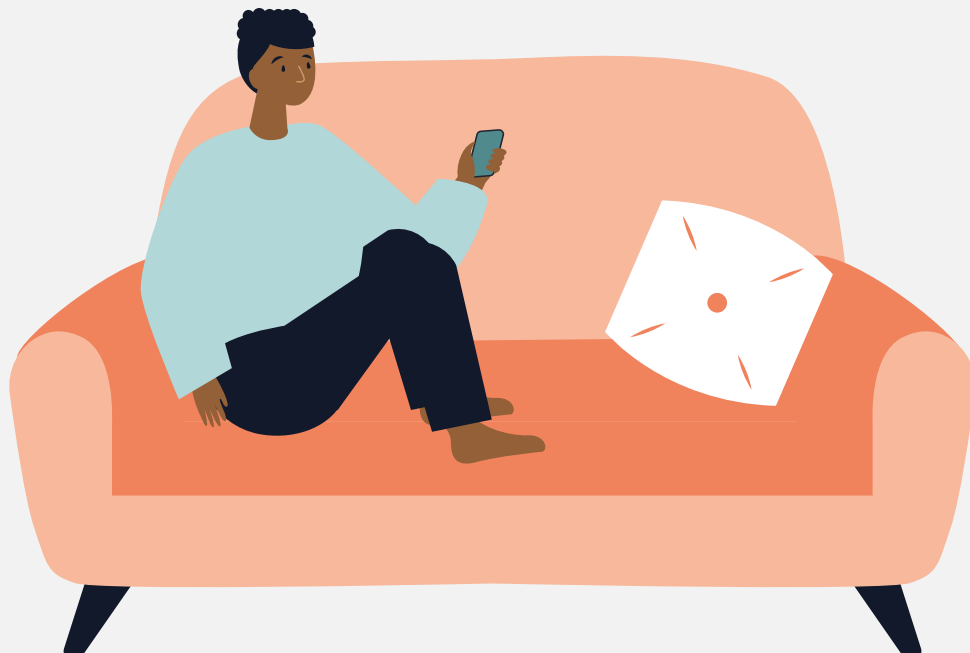
The research shows 36% of respondents feel uncomfortable approaching someone for support at work, it's no surprise that anonymity topped the list of most important factors.

Anonymous digital mental health platforms - alongside open and supportive communication and culture - are effective to remove the barrier of stigma. Not only does this encourage people to seek support sooner, but anonymity allows people to honestly disclose their concerns - reflected in the fact that **96% of respondents responded "yes" when we asked if they felt comfortable answering questions.**

Anonymous platforms that collect data on the workforce without jeopardising identity can also help employers. Understanding and benchmarking the hidden risks within your organisation can, with the help of clinical professionals, be used to develop mental wellbeing frameworks that more effectively target the unique risks in your workforce.



Make support immediately freely accessible to all



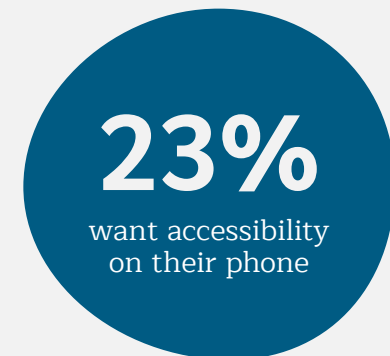
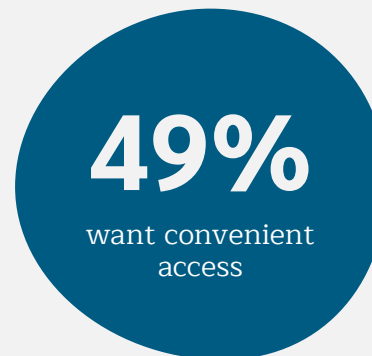
It was also crucial for our respondents that access to mental health support was made easy. Support is often limited to working hours, a set number of sessions, in-person settings, or rely on external services - many of which are overwhelmed. For many, this acts as a barrier, where accessing support isn't feasible, practical, or comfortable.

With 62% of employees wanting free access to support, employers have the ability to support this need through reward and employee benefits programmes. The important point is that access to support must be relevant and built around the needs of your workforce.

Traditional initiatives also tend to focus on providing care to those who are critically in need.

Whilst this is an important offering, the majority of the workforce - [who don't need an emergency intervention, but aren't necessarily thriving and need some kind of support](#) - are left feeling like they can't easily approach support as it often doesn't apply to them:

- **Just 5% of respondents used employee assistance programs (EAPs)**, - which offer short-term counselling to those in crisis.
- Increased numbers on waitlists has resulted in [clinical thresholds rising](#), making it harder (particularly for those who are not in crisis) to access support services. **Just 7% of respondents reported using telephone counselling**, and **only 6% accessed in person support**.



Clinical view: An employer's duty of care



Mental health in the workplace is still viewed quite two-dimensionally - you either have bad mental health or you don't. But many of us know that we all have mental health on a fluctuating spectrum and symptoms shouldn't have to worsen for employees to get support.

It's in the best interest and duty of employers to provide levels of interventions that include preventative care where nobody gets left behind.

Dr Lynne Green
Chief Clinical Officer
Kooth

Flexible, person-centred and professional support



Mental health varies between all of us and no one solution is able to cover the needs of everyone. Meeting the needs of each individual requires a mental health professional to effectively identify and tailor support. Indeed, having a personalised service with clinical expertise was important to our respondents.

Despite apps and various other digital solutions stating they have an evidence base behind their work, only around [3% of mental health apps can actually back up their claims](#), meaning many fail to provide the necessary clinical insight to effectively support employees and help them with their specific individual needs.

As we will see later, many employers focus on offering support options whereby an employee must identify themselves or undergo means testing. As we have seen these create barriers

to access and compromise employees' need for anonymity. Employers need to evaluate the options they can provide in both the workplace and digital space to best meet these needs.

Having professional mental wellbeing clinicians at the centre of support options is absolutely crucial for the safety and support of your workforce. Importantly, the knowledge and expertise of clinical professionals overseeing your whole wellbeing framework can help you understand the needs of your workforce and guide you to make effective decisions.



want the ability to pick the most relevant mental health topics to them

Multiple options and a wider framework are essential

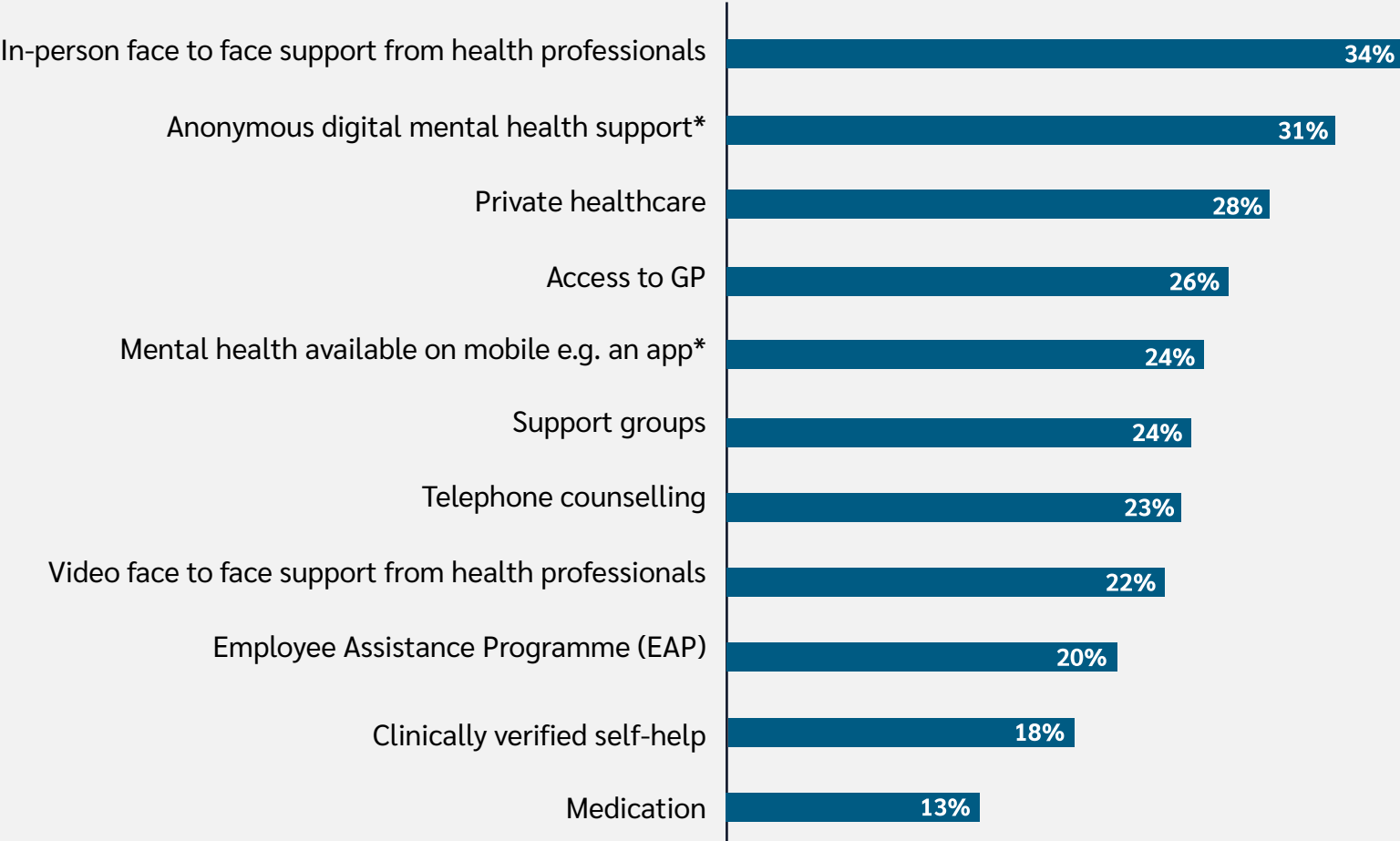
“A blanket response doesn’t fit all and everyone deals with things differently. Some need more support and some need less.”
anonymous respondent



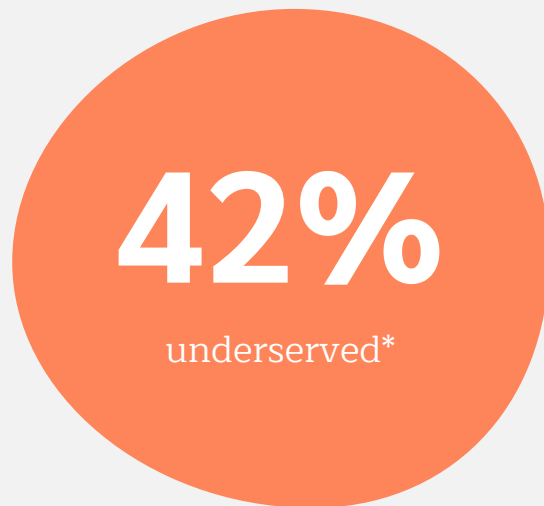
When we asked what specific tool employees would find most helpful (figure 3) it is clear respondents want a mix of solutions that reflect their needs for anonymity, accessibility, and access to mental wellbeing professionals.

We know that no two people have the same mental health experience, so there is no one size fits all solution. Needs and preferences vary between employees, but can also change within an individual. Having a variety of options to suit all needs at all times ensures that nobody gets left behind.

Figure 3. Chart showing the support tools that employees most want in the workplace



Fundamentally, there are gaps in what options employers are offering...



When we align our data on what employees want (figure 3) with what employers are offering (figure 4), the underlying data shows that there is a difference (figure 5)

...and the support employees want

Employees are calling for more - or better aligned - options like anonymous digital platforms, support groups, in-person support, and private healthcare, all which centre around their needs for more anonymity, flexibility and convenience, and professional support.

Figure 4 shows EAPs, telephone support and private healthcare were made most readily available to employees. Whilst employers appear to have a similar

view to employees on access to private healthcare, we can see in Figure 3, employees did not value EAPs and phone support to the same extent. This could be due to the perceived limited relevance and uptake. The data shows employees valued other support options instead.

*Over-service and under-service is calculated based on the difference between what people want and what they have access to, and then presenting this as a percentage of the overall demand for the option.

Figure 4. What employees understood their employers offered them.

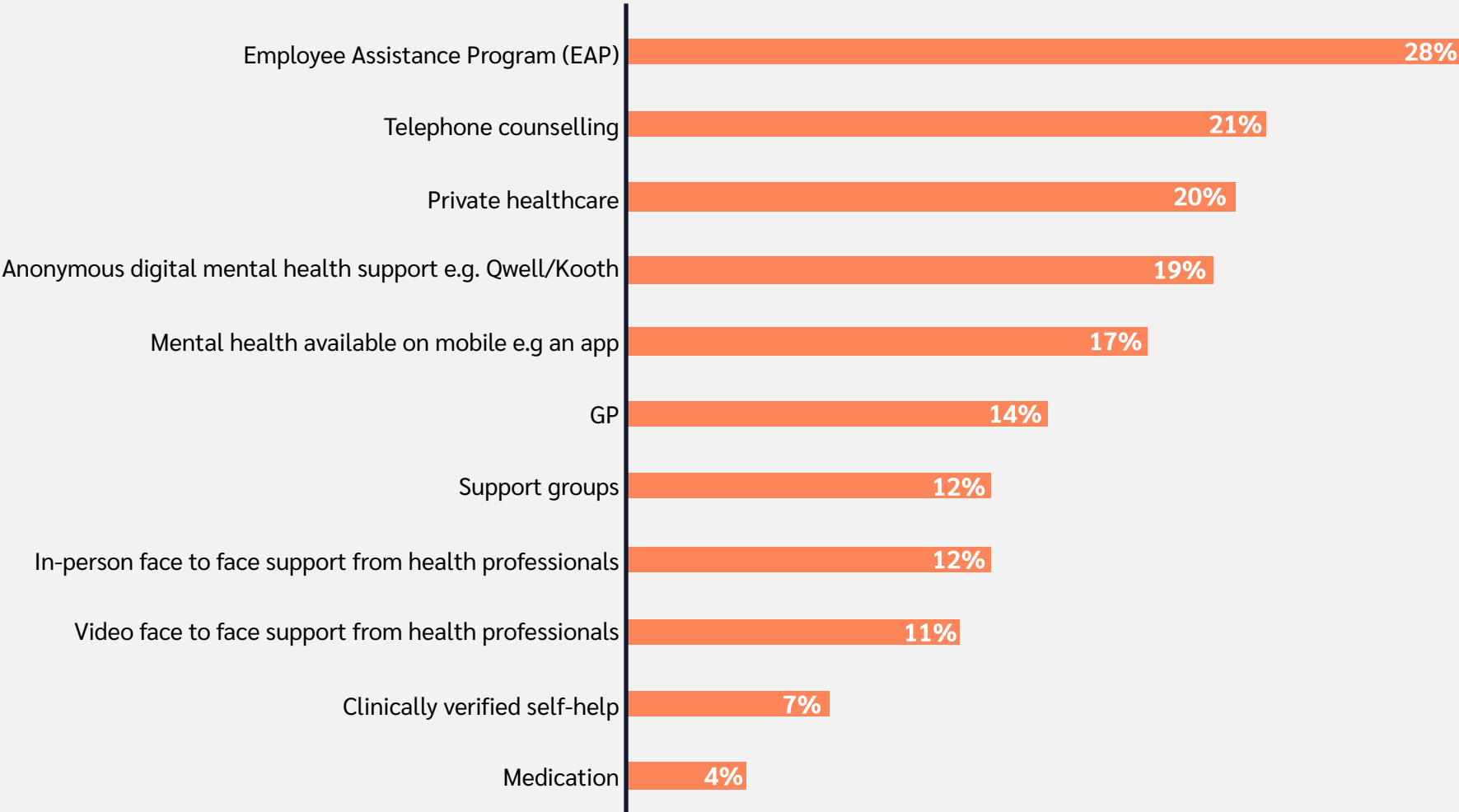


Figure 5 clearly shows the gap between what employers perceive to be most important compared with staff - and a resulting void where workforce needs are not being met.

When we calculate the difference between what people want and what they have access to, as a percentage of the overall demand for each option, we can identify the size of this as the service gap.

From all of the options available, EAPs were the only option where availability exceeded employee demand, and therefore the only option which 'over-served' employees in this way.

EAPs

- 28% of employees said their employers provided it
- 20% of employees said they wanted it
- 139% over-service
- Only 5% of employees said they used it

EAPs are considered an important part of any employer's framework. This is by far the most commonly quoted support option available and where employers looking to invest in employee mental wellbeing are inclined to invest. However, in the research only a small percentage of the workforce (5%) said they had used their EAP, including the associated EAP apps and services.

The data would suggest that EAPs should not be viewed as a panacea for employee mental wellbeing support and should instead be considered as one part of a larger, tailored framework.

When we look at all the other support options, employees were consistently under-served. There was an overall 42% under-service gap between the support employees want and their ability to access these support services through their employers.

The table below shows a marked gap associated with the top three most wanted support options. There is an average 57% under-service gap across the top three most wanted support options.

We can see from the data just how far off employers are from meeting the needs of their employees.

To bridge this service gap and start offering support that is in tune with the needs of employees, organisations must first learn about what their workforces are experiencing and what they need, being prepared to listen and take action.

In-person face to face support from health professionals	35% under-served	This most highly wanted option was unobtainable for many.
Anonymous digital mental health support*	63% under-served	Employees seeking digital support options with anonymity were left wanting.
Private healthcare	72% under-served	This highly wanted option was seldom believed to be available



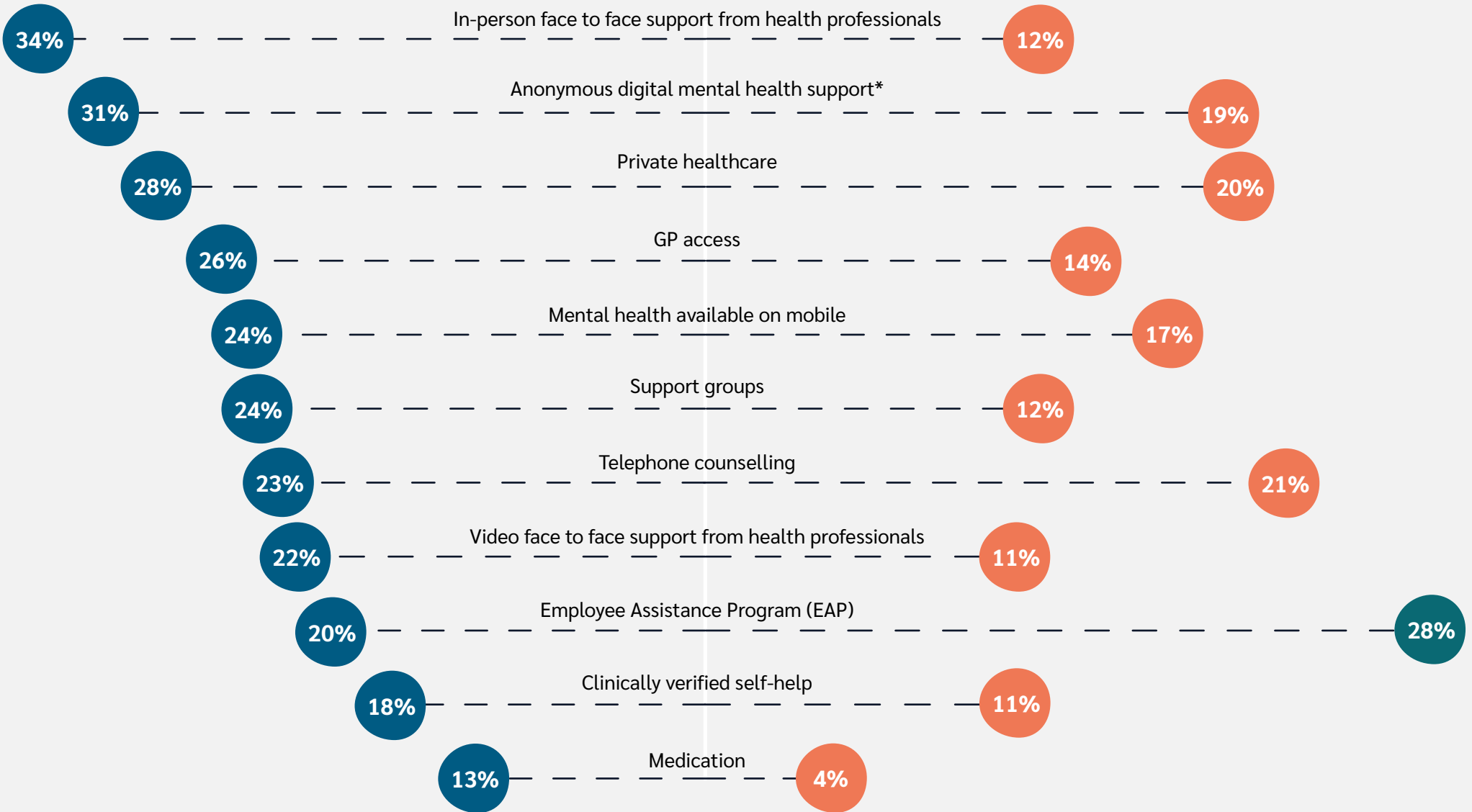
Figure 5. Chart showing the degree to which employees are under/over serviced by their employer's support options. *adjusted to focus on none Kooth clients to avoid skewing

-  What employees want
-  Want more of
-  Demand is met

What employees want

Support options

What employers offer



Clinical view: A more flexible and wider framework is essential



To maximise the effect of your investments, it's also crucial that your tools are embedded into a holistic wellbeing framework that emphasises a positive mental health culture, including:

- The ability to set meaningful goals around workforce mental wellbeing
- Compassionate and conscious leaders who are sufficiently trained to identify and support mental health in the workplace
- Internal communications that centre around the key mental health concerns identified
- Policies that support wellbeing, such as flexible working
- Spaces for colleagues to foster positive relationships
- A strong focus on equality and diversity
- Focus on evidence based solutions and safeguarding
- Reasonable workloads, sufficient breaks, and fair benefits
- How to gain visibility of workforce mental health, monitor and report on progress without compromising confidentiality

A balance needs to be struck within your available support options to allow for:

- Personal preferences of employees around in-person and digital options
- A full spectrum of needs from resilience to acute and specialist support
- Prevention, early intervention and treatment

This culture lays the foundation of employee wellbeing and is vital for developing an environment where employees feel empowered and supported by the workplace, and feel safe accessing support if they need it.

Dr Hannah Wilson
Consultant Clinical Psychologist
Kooth

4. Hitting the Mark

Our data delved into the key trends in workplace wellbeing amongst UK workforces, helping you gain a deeper insight and make better decisions about employee mental health. But each organisation will have unique risks, challenges, and requirements. To find out what your workers want, **it's time to finally ask the question.**

Here's our 4-step process for identifying the needs of your workforce and building an effective framework that meets them.





1. Benchmark

Collecting anonymous data on your workforce - through tools such as the [Flourish Mental Health Check](#) - can pinpoint the specific risks and needs within your organisation.

This information helps you to understand your employees and track wellbeing over time, meaning you can measure and evaluate the impact of initiatives you introduce, as well as track new and emerging issues within your workforce.

2. Find your framework

A team of clinical professionals can help you to understand your data and establish a clear tailored framework for your workforce's mental wellbeing. This includes advice on what tools to invest in to provide the right balance of support and guidance on how to build a culture with the wellbeing considerations of your workforce built in at every level.

3. Targeted investment

Resource your workforce with the tools, training, and support they need to be able to follow your framework.

4. Continuous improvement

Building a sustainable and adaptable framework that lasts means continuously collecting data on your workforce, monitoring the underlying issues and impact of your framework, and making changes to respond to the current need.

The research

Employee participants

- 735 employees participated in the research, over the course of five months. The research focused on key worker sectors, primarily education, grocery and retail, finance and banking, care, health and emergency services, and charity.
- Respondents ranged from age 18 to 65+

Our research tool and clinical scales

Kooth Work's Flourish Mental Health Check is an anonymous survey-based assessment tool, designed to benchmark the mental wellbeing of your workforce, get to the heart of the mental wellbeing issues impacting your employees and assess the effectiveness of your existing support.

Developed by our expert research team at Kooth and headed up by Dr Louisa Salhi - who is affiliated with the University of Kent - it has been approved by the University of Kent's School of Psychology ethics board and follows the guidance of the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP).

The Flourish Mental Health Check is part of a Research Project to gain wider insight into the mental wellbeing needs

of workforces; we anticipate academic publications to be released in 2023 to support these early findings.

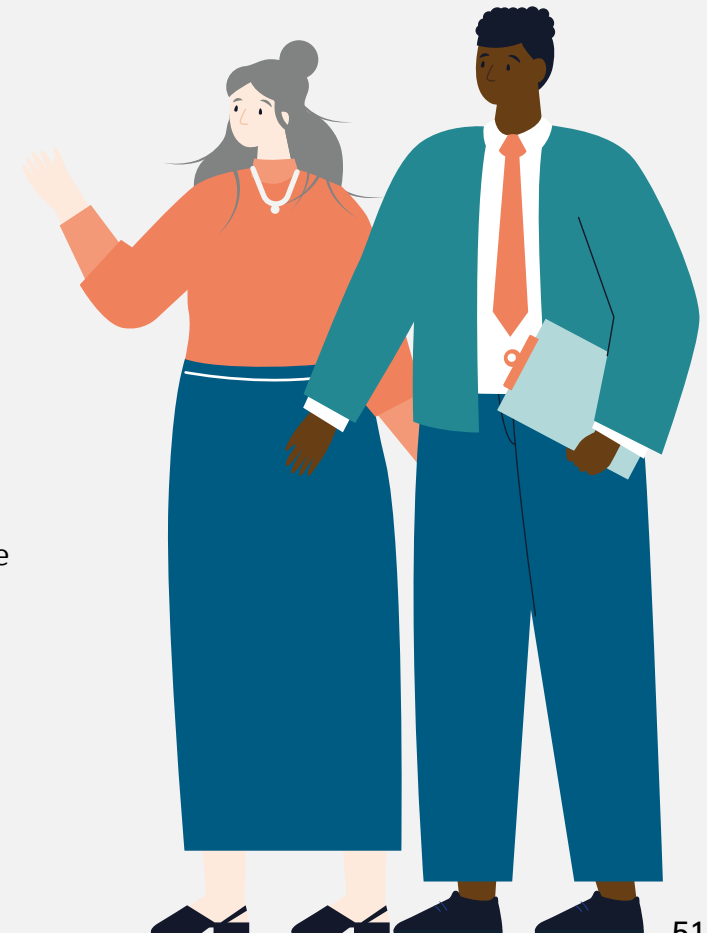
Mental wellbeing is multifaceted. The tool provides a holistic view of your workforce wellbeing assessing mental wellbeing through each of these lenses:

- Their current workplace wellbeing culture
- Their own mental health
- Their wider environment and home life
- Their mental health support needs
- The suitability of workplace support options

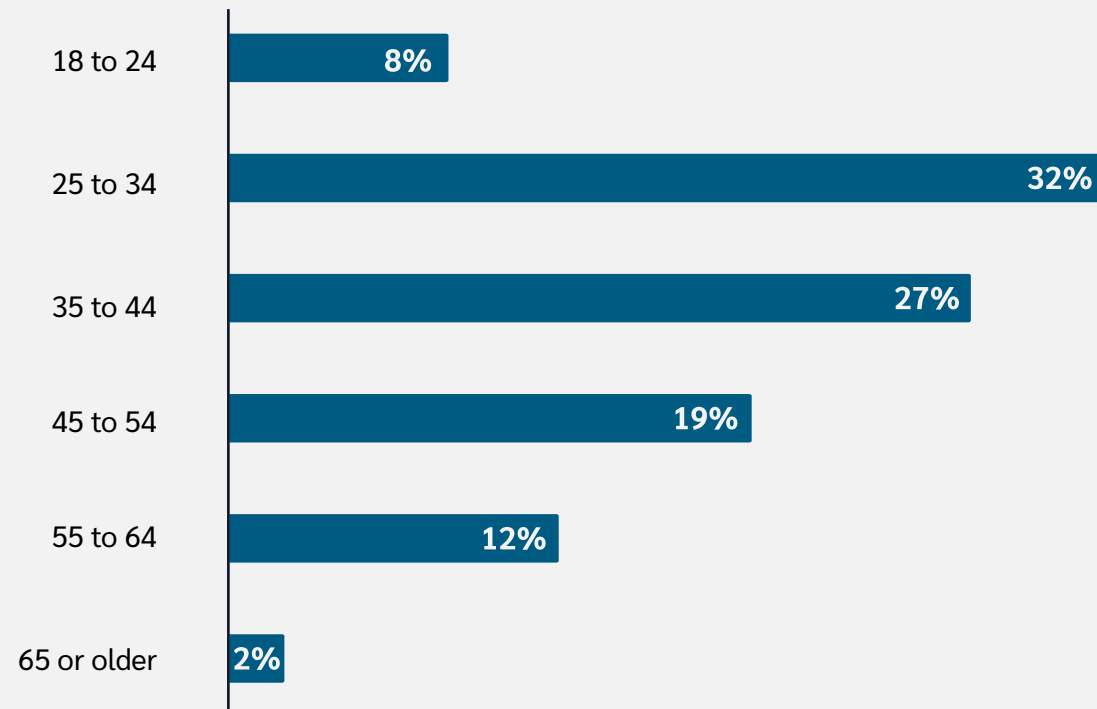
The tool is also underpinned by clinically backed scales:

- Flourishing Scale
- Work and Social Adjustment Scale (WSAS)
- Generalised Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD-7)
- Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI)
- The World Health Organisation- Five Well-Being Index (WHO-5)

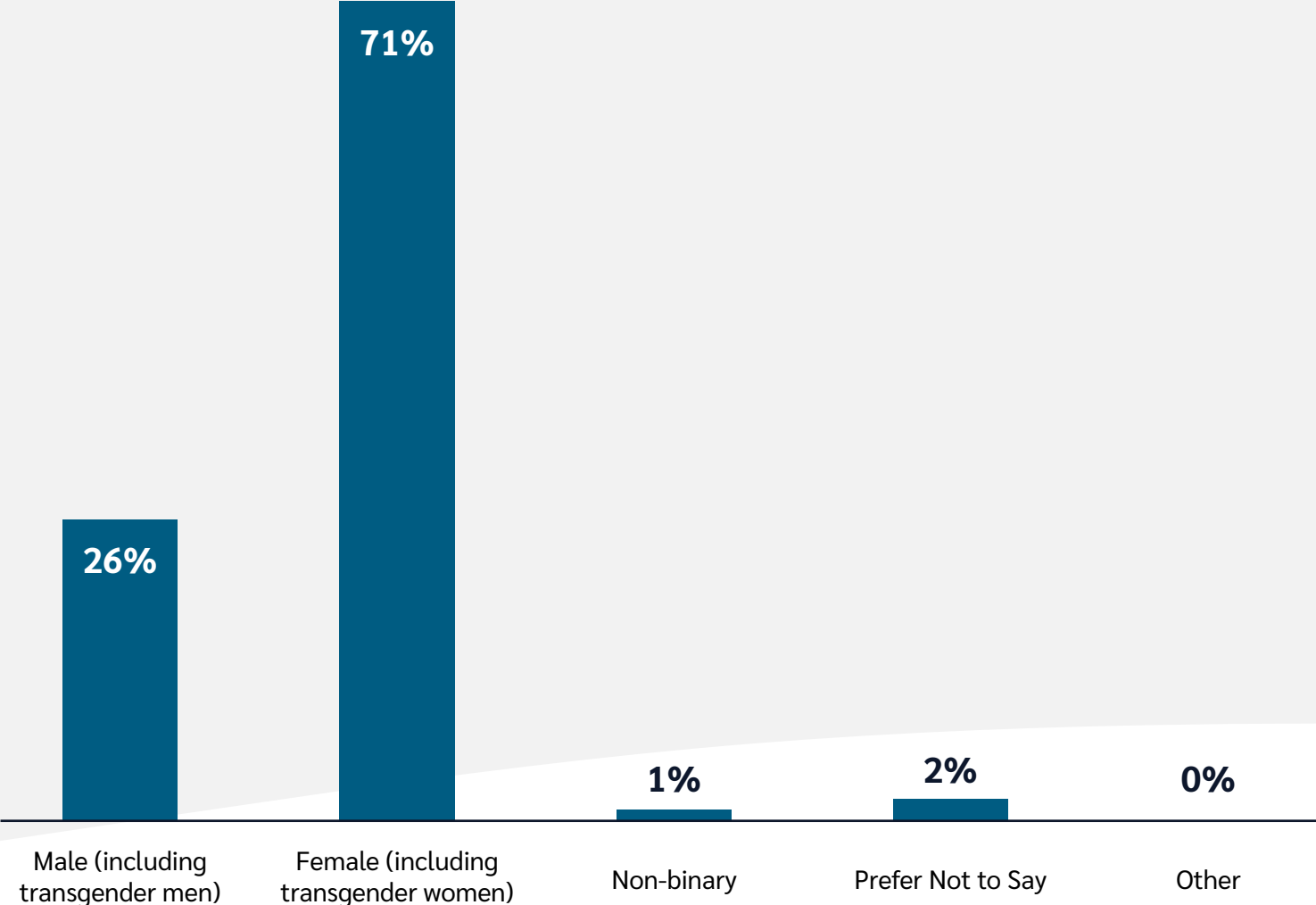
Workers who take part in the Flourish Mental Health Check gain real-time insights into their mental health, and are signposted to various support avenues. This includes crisis lines, and Qwell - Kooth Work's digital mental health platform with immediate access to talk with a mental wellbeing professional.



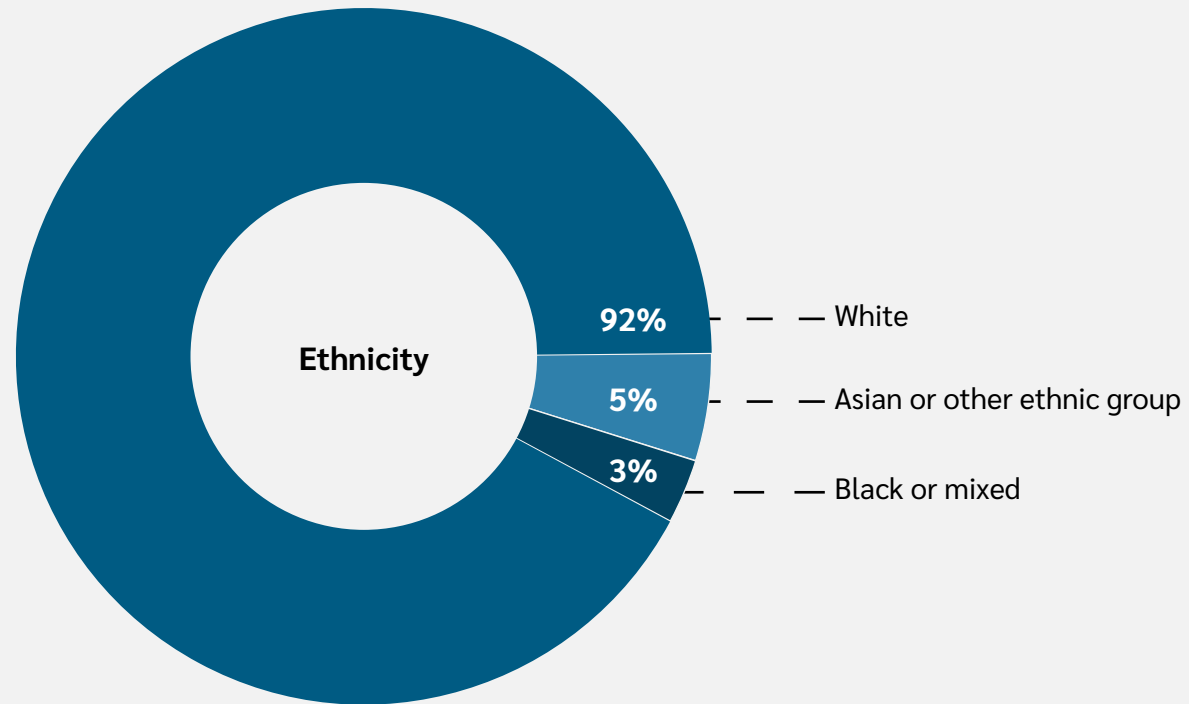
Age



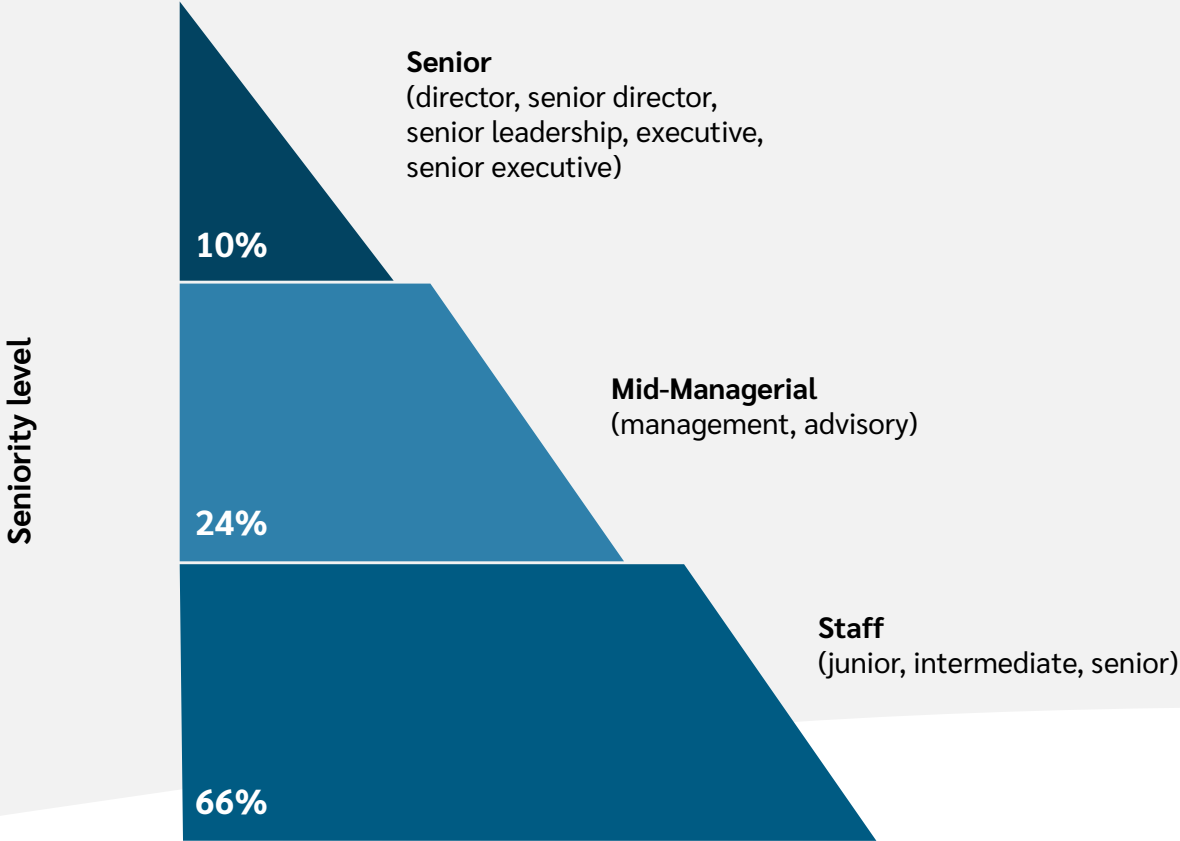
Gender



Ethnicity



Seniority



Additional resources

[Flourish workforce mental health check tool](#)

[The Flourishing Scale \(2009\)](#)

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Want to know more?

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