



Trust, empathy and authenticity:

# Promoting **MENTAL HEALTH**

## and wellbeing in the workplace



Report developed by:



Commissioned by:





# Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands across Australia where this report was developed, and recognise their connections to land, sea and community. We also pay our respects to elders past and present.

We would like to thank Ethical Partners for commissioning this report and for shining a spotlight on practical ways workplaces can integrate simple measures into their practices creating ripple effects on employees, their families and our broader communities. We welcome their dedication to shifting the conversation on this topic, so that supporting the mental health and wellbeing of everyone in the workplace becomes the standard.

We would like to thank those who participated in the case studies. This includes Leah, a young person who shared from her own lived-experience to contribute to this report (Leah’s name and the company she worked at has been de-identified.) We would also like to thank Chris Akayan, Head of Culture & Capability and Brian Long, Group General Manager Health, Safety & Environment from Mirvac.

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## Foreword by Ethical Partners

Ethical Partners firmly believes that the companies in which we invest have a fundamental responsibility to support the health of their employees, their customers and the communities in which they operate. Furthermore, we strongly believe that health encompasses both physical and mental health and safety.

As such, the way a company actively considers, supports and protects mental health has been a key consideration within our proprietary in-house ESG research screening process, the EPORA (Ethical Partners Opportunity and Risk Assessment) for several years. Mental health has also been a key element of our active and ongoing engagements with portfolio companies over the past few years – examples of this range from engaging with all our portfolio companies on supporting mental health during COVID, to engaging with multiple companies on elevating psychological safety to the board level and same resourcing as physical safety, to a deep engagement focus on sexual harassment, bullying and racism with mining companies, and on supporting the mental health of children and youth through our research collaboration with UNICEF in 2022.

In a reflection of our commitment to this issue, Ethical Partners is also a founding signatory to the Global investor Statement on Workplace Mental Health\*, which recognises the business case for investee companies to protect and promote good workplace mental health, both as a duty of care and as material to a company's long term value creation, productivity, lower turnover, increased innovation and reduced absences. Furthermore, this collaboration sets clear expectations for companies on how they should begin to address mental health in the workplace, as well as underscores the importance to investors of considering this issue in both their investment analysis and their engagements.

Unfortunately, however, it is clear that there is still a long way to go in how businesses support mental health in the workplace. So, what can ASX listed companies actually do to meaningfully, genuinely and proactively protect and enhance their employees' mental health? And what can, and should, responsible investors be looking for in order to identify and positively screen for those companies genuinely aiming to support mental health?

To answer these questions, understand the key initiatives and pillars that companies should consider, and to help develop a practical framework which ASX companies and investors alike could look to for guidance, Ethical Partners has partnered with batyr, a wonderful mental health charity with whom we have had a long relationship with through our Tatrai Giving Fund. We also engaged closely with Mirvac, one of the leading companies identified through our EPORA process, to provide a case study of how these initiatives can make an impact in practice.

We very much hope that this report serves to accelerate these conversations within ASX listed companies and investors, provide inspiration for companies to investigate more deeply their role in supporting mental health, and provide a clear and practical guide for boards and management to develop their own frameworks to address this crucial issue.

We thank batyr for this ground-breaking report and our ongoing collaboration and look forward to continuing to advocate and engage on this issue with all ASX listed companies going forward.

Matt Nacard,  
CEO & Co-Founder



Robyn Parkin,  
Head of Sustainability



## About batyr

batyr is a preventative mental health charity, created and driven by young people, for young people. Stigma, under-resourced communities and other barriers to accessing quality information and services, stop young people from getting the right support or knowing how to look after their mental health before they are in crisis. As leaders in prevention, batyr has reached over 355,000 young people through evidence-based programs in Australia to address this.

By empowering young people with the confidence and skills to get through tough times and look out for each other, batyr works to create stigma free communities that champion young people's mental health and wellbeing. Through sharing lived experience stories and peer-to-peer education, batyr is keeping young people from reaching the point of crisis.

Recognised for batyr's expertise in improving mental health outcomes for communities, batyr is involved in various expert working groups and advisory committees. This includes Suicide Prevention Australia's Policy Committee, National Mental Health Commission's National Stigma and Discrimination Reduction Strategy, and the Global Mental Health Action Network. batyr has also been requested to consult on leading national mental health projects such as the development of the Australian University Mental Health Framework led by Orygen, and the National Evaluation of the headspace Model.

In addition to working with schools, universities and communities across Australia, batyr delivers mental health education programs in workplaces to reduce stigma, improve mental health literacy and shift attitudes towards reaching out for support if needed.



\*<https://www.ethicalpartners.com.au/post/founding-signatory-to-the-global-investor-statement-on-workplace-mental-health>

# Executive Summary



## Overview of the issue in Australia

- One in five people aged 16-85 have experienced a mental disorder in the last year, and one in six have experienced suicidal thoughts in their lifetime (ABS, 2022)
- Two in five young people experienced a mental disorder in the past year (ABS, 2022), and young people's psychological distress was already on the rise pre-pandemic (Hall et al. 2019)
- Mental illness is costing the Australian economy an estimated \$70 billion per year, with a further \$150 billion per year of associated costs of disability and premature death due to mental illness (Productivity Commission, 2020)
- For each dollar invested in Australian workplace mental health, a return between \$1.30 to \$4 has been shown (Productivity Commission, 2020)
- Changing attitudes towards work, a global pandemic, economic insecurity and new generations of young people beginning their careers makes it a complex area to which companies and organisations must pay attention.

## Report Approach

This report sets out to better understand the role that work plays in the mental health and wellbeing of employees, with a particular focus on young people in the workforce.

### Three questions framed our approach:

**'What role does work play in mental health and wellbeing?'**

**'How do young people experience mental health and wellbeing in the workplace?'**

**'What can companies and organisations do to support employee mental health?'**

To understand these questions we completed a scan of relevant articles and reports, a survey (n=88) and two case studies: one from the perspective of a company, Mirvac, and the other from a young person. We also analysed recommendations from the scan and survey to develop a wellbeing framework with tangible recommendations.

## A Snapshot of the Survey Results



of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that **when they feel good mentally they are more productive at work**

Qualitative survey data showed that the **workplace can have a positive and protective effect** on people's mental health, as well as having the potential for impacting mental ill-health, and that the difference for some can be a balancing act



of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that if their workplace prioritises mental health, wellbeing or a healthy workplace culture, they are **more likely to continue working for them**

Key components of meaningful wellbeing initiatives included that they are **'authentic', 'ongoing' and require 'follow-through'**, built on meaningful relationships, and include participation from all levels, especially senior leadership

## Wellbeing Framework

Recommendations for how companies can create meaningful impact on workplace mental health and wellbeing are outlined in the Wellbeing Framework on page 26. These three guiding principles underpin them all:

- **Take a systems-level approach** by making mental health and wellbeing fundamental to the business, integrating it into the culture, policies, business strategy and structures at all levels.
- **Take a human-centred approach** making sure strong relationships built on empathy and respect are at the core of any wellbeing plan, policy or initiative.
- **Take a participatory approach** and include your team in the design and implementation of workplace wellbeing activities.

### The wellbeing framework contains recommendations that sit across five pillars:

- Leadership and accountability
- Policies and structures
- Culture
- Supporting people through mental ill-health
- Wellbeing and thriving





## Introduction

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Mental health and wellbeing in the workplace has fast become a critical challenge for companies to address. In Australia, mental health is a significant issue with one in five people aged 16-85 having experienced a mental disorder in the last year, and one in six having experienced suicidal thoughts in their lifetime (ABS, 2022). These issues do not stop during work hours. The Australian Government's Productivity Commission (2019), the World Health Organisation (2022) and many major companies, including Bupa (2021), EY (2022) and Asana (Raeburn, 2022), have all declared workplace mental health a key priority, placing more responsibility on businesses to support employee mental health and create environments that promote wellbeing.





## Transformations in the world of work

In the aftermath of a pandemic, and with new generations of young people entering the workforce bringing new ideas and expectations, companies must understand, shape and adapt to a new world of work. COVID-19 escalated the pace of change by normalising remote work, while simultaneously disrupting labour markets and increasing financial instability (WHO, 2022). These events have not only impacted employee mental health, but they have changed the way many people think about work. Burnout, as well as a new found focus on work-life balance has been associated by many as leading to mass resignations across sectors. Phenomenons such as the **'great resignation'** and **'quiet quitting'** reflect this shifting landscape. In August 2022, an estimated 4.2 million people quit their jobs in America, and another study showed that 58% of workers felt the pandemic forced them to rethink their work-life balance (Bain & Company, 2022).

Young people are at the forefront of these changes. Burnout has been linked in particular to Gen Z and Millennials with some research showing **46% feel burned out due to the intensity and demands of their working environment** (Deloitte, 2022). In 2022 the term **'quiet quitting'** went viral across the youth-focused social media platform TikTok, referring to the idea that rather than quitting a job, people can quit the idea of 'going above and beyond' and the 'hustle mentality that your job has to be your life'.

In addition to these trends, views on what are considered to be reasonable activities a company implements to support staff wellbeing have changed. In the past, recognising days such as World Mental Health Day and RU OK? Day, integrating one-off mental health awareness activities such as bake sales, or adding free yoga classes for staff may have been acceptable, but now are being seen as insufficient.

In reference to this shift, the term **'wellbeing-washing'** is being used about companies who may be viewed as 'all talk, no action.' In recent research by Claro Wellbeing, 71% of organisations "take part in mental health awareness initiatives, despite just over a third (36%) offering 'good' or 'outstanding' mental health benefits to employees, according to their staff." (Murray, 2022).

These cultural shifts demand workplaces pay closer attention and support the strategic shift from workplace wellbeing as a bonus to a necessity.

## The cost of mental ill-health and impact on productivity

Anxiety and depression are estimated to cost the world economy **\$1 trillion a year in lost productivity** (WHO, 2022) and the Australian Productivity Commission estimated that mental illness is costing the Australian economy around \$70 billion per year (2019). Additionally, approximately \$150 billion per year is estimated to be lost due to associated costs of disability and premature death from mental illness. The Productivity Commission also estimated absenteeism and reduced productivity at work due to mental ill-health is costing the economy up to \$17 billion a year, with people experiencing mental ill-health working less when they are at work, and requiring an estimated 14-18 days off to support themselves (Productivity Commission, 2019).

As reinforced by the survey conducted for this report, **97% of respondents said they agreed or strongly agreed that when they feel good mentally, they are more productive at work.** Increasingly, companies are recognising the potential productivity gains by focusing on workplace wellbeing. Research published by Deloitte suggests that employers can expect a return of £5.30 (US\$6) on average for every £1 (US\$1) spent, through benefits such as improved worker engagement, enhanced productivity, increased innovation and organisational sustainability. In a report by KPMG and Mental Health Australia, they estimated that mental health interventions had a return on investment of \$1.30 to \$4.70 for every dollar spent, depending on the intervention (2018).



## Workplace risk factors for mental ill-health

There have been a number of workplace risk factors identified which are associated with mental ill-health. In addressing these risk factors, companies can mitigate the potential for psychological harm at work.

### The World Health Organisation (2022) has identified these psycho-social workplace risk factors:

- **Content and design of work tasks** (e.g. lack of variety, under use of skills)
- **Workload and work pace** (e.g. work overload or underload, high time pressure)
- **Work schedule** (e.g. inflexible work schedules, unpredictable work hours)
- **Control over workload and decision-making** (e.g. low input in decision making, no control over workload)
- **Working environment and adequate equipment** (e.g. poor environmental conditions, lack of appropriate equipment)
- **Organisational culture and function** (e.g. poor communication, low levels of support for problem solving and personal development, imbalances between effort and reward)
- **Nature of interpersonal relationships at work** (e.g. social isolation, interpersonal conflict)
- **An individual's role in the organisation** (e.g. role ambiguity)
- **Career development** (e.g. career stagnation or uncertainty, under or over-promotion, perceived unfair pay)
- **Work-life balance** (e.g. conflicting demands of work and home)

Workers who have more exposure to these risk factors have a higher likelihood of developing mental ill-health. For example, an employee who has a poor relationship with their manager, very little input into decision making, is regularly under high time pressure and has no opportunity to 'switch off' while at home may be considered at high risk of developing mental ill-health.

It can also be common to hear of new graduates entering competitive workforces who are required to meet high expectations to remain in the program or be accepted as a permanent employee. Expectations and behaviours that normalise extremely high work loads and overtime result in a reduction in sleep or healthy eating, a lack of socialising or investing in personal relationships, and an overall reduction in the quality of a person's life. With high pressured workplace cultures or settings that commonly involve events or networking to secure clients or for relationship building, alcohol or drug use can be exacerbated, heightening the level of risk to employees further. Extreme levels of pressure over an extended period of time can increase the likelihood of mental ill-health, creating ripple effects into a person's life, and the lives of those around them.

It's also important to note that addressing risk factors is only one half of the equation, aimed at minimising harm. **Promoting wellbeing and supporting staff to thrive** is also an area where there needs to be increased attention. The Wellbeing Framework on page 26 offers practical ways companies can address the risk factors listed above, including protective factors that can support staff to thrive.



## Young people's wellbeing at work

The mental health of young Australians is a significant challenge. **Two in five young people experienced a mental disorder in the past year** (ABS, 2022), and young people's psychological distress was already increasing pre-pandemic (Hall et al. 2019). Sadly, **suicide is the leading cause of death for young Australians** (ABS, 2020). This has been impacted by a period of great uncertainty and challenge with multiple crises like the pandemic, climate change and economic instability, and these events are often hardest on young people who are in a time of transition.

Young adulthood is a key period of development, and for many involves a transition into the workforce that is considered a critical stage and can have impacts on wellbeing (Maheen & Milner, 2019).

Survey respondents for this report indicated that **high workloads and periods of change including starting a new job/role, and organisational change were cited as areas that can impact or have impacted their mental health the most.**

The significance of transitioning into work needs attention. Investing in this in a constructive way can lead to "sustainable, happier and more productive working lives." (Maheen & Milner, 2019). On the other hand, a lack of measures that address this critical transition period can increase chances of unemployment and rates of mental ill-health.

COVID-19 has made matters worse, with more than double the number of young people in the workforce reporting high psychological distress during the pandemic. A report by Microsoft (2021) showed that **60% of Gen Z (18-25) say they are merely surviving or are struggling**, suggesting that they need to be 're-energised'. This has had a significant impact on the retention of young workers with one survey suggesting that **68% of Millennials, and 81% of Gen Z left roles for mental health reasons in 2021** (Greenwood & Anas, 2021). This problem has a flow on effect, as many young people do not have the confidence to find work because of the impacts of COVID-19.

Young people are also at the forefront of significant changes in workplace culture. One article cites young professionals' top priorities for work are **meaning and purpose, followed by authentic connection** (Newport Institute, 2022). As evidenced by the concept of 'quiet quitting', young people want more

work-life balance, they are more **purpose-driven and are pursuing work for values-driven companies**. A company's focus on mental health is also an important factor, with many young people reporting that a company's approach to mental health is a contributing factor in their decision to work for them. This includes weighting stigma-free, supportive environments as important areas to consider when making these decisions (Patty, 2021).

## Wellbeing of carers

Although young people are the next generation of workers, their parents and carers are already engaged in the workforce. Implementing activities that are targeted to the needs of employees, including carers, can be helpful (Staglin, 2022). For example, being able to point parents or carers to resources or support that can educate them on how to help a child who may be going through a tough time can be valuable. On the other hand, looking out for the mental health of carers who are often not considering their own mental health when supporting someone else is also critical.

A growing group considered the 'sandwich generation' is considered to be experiencing a great deal of strain and pressure stemming from caring for children and also ageing parents. According to PwC's 8th Annual Employee Financial Wellness Survey, "One in five employees financially support their parents. Of this group, more than two thirds also provide non-financial support (i.e. in a carer role) and more than half also have dependent children" (2019).

Similarly, young people in the workforce may be in carer roles for parents or friends themselves. In a recent study completed by batyr, Western Sydney University and Dr Erin Nolan, **94% of young people surveyed indicated they have helped a friend through mental ill-health, and 76% of young people surveyed said friends provide critical support to their friends** (Hanckel et., al, 2022). The pressures of supporting someone through mental ill-health can bleed into many areas of a person's life, including their work. Workplaces can be an excellent place for reducing stigma and increasing mental health literacy leading to positive outcomes in various areas of a person's life. Just like the pressure of caring for someone with mental ill-health can impact someone's experiences at work, the snowball effect of learning about mental health and knowing how to support those around us can have healthy effects on experiences at work.



## Intergenerational differences

Intergenerational differences are also present in the workplace environment, which might require nuanced responses, for example; **financial stress and instability are reported to cause stress for people across generations**, however individual differences across groups may exist. Millennials and Gen X report **concern over not being financially prepared if an emergency arises, whereas older generations report concerns about not being able to retire when hoped for** (PwC, 2019).

Through a study led by Nespresso Professional, **Gen X and Gen Y reported workplaces were critical for connecting with others**. Changes to work environments, combined with an increase in work from home due to the implications of COVID-19 are considered to have consequences on social interaction and career growth. This can cause increased pressure, isolation or added worry. Many people also feel they are perceived to be working harder when at an office compared to at home. In the same study, the **Boomer generation reported feeling less pressure to be in an office to gain social or development opportunities or to be perceived as working harder** (2021).

Understanding the generational differences that may exist in a workplace can increase understanding of specific needs and concerns of employees. This understanding creates an effective roadmap to better inform the implementation of targeted activities within wellbeing strategies.

## Protective factors and promoting wellbeing in the workplace

There are opportunities in the workplace to not only minimise the potential for psychological harm, but promote the mental health and wellbeing of employees, enabling them to thrive. One study found that a common mistake made by businesses in their approach to workplace wellbeing was to only focus on protecting mental health and not promoting wellbeing.

**In addressing risk factors and promoting wellbeing, workplaces can enhance mental health.** This can be done by proactively creating environments that enable **worker autonomy, provide fair pay, work-life balance, professional progression and the absence of bullying and harassment** (Marmot Review, 2010). Integrating activities that create community also acts as a protective factor. Research from Edelman shows that **69% of employees believe the people they work with are a significant source of community in their life** (2022).

The benefits of these approaches are observed by employees and employers alike and include **optimised workforce productivity, sustained high morale and minimised absenteeism and tension between colleagues**. It can also provide economic security, social connection, opportunity and a sense of purpose. A 2019 study involving 10 companies in Canada showed that workplace mental health programmes can deliver a positive return on investment of CA\$2.18 (US\$1.65) within three years (Kangasniemi et al. 2019).



## Strategy and leadership in workplace mental health

While trying to implement solutions, many organisations make the common mistake of creating tokenistic programming, with 'shallow' wellness activities, as opposed to addressing structural and systemic issues. The Australian Financial Review highlighted the importance of wellbeing moving away from 'HR to the CEO' (Durkin, 2020).

**Leadership is a core tenet of workplace wellbeing,** with outcomes being tied to the approach of its company's leaders. A systematic review by Skakon et al (2010) showed that leadership styles have a significant impact on employee wellbeing. **Leader burnout and leader wellbeing was strongly associated with employee burnout and wellbeing. Positive and transformational leadership styles were strongly associated with employee wellbeing and job satisfaction.**

Leaders who work directly with staff to inform wellbeing strategies and ensure they are designed and implemented in informed ways have a greater chance of success. Creating and implementing strategies that target the real needs of employees based on their insights creates a more effective and efficient strategy, increasing results for both employees and companies in a more rapid way.

Lastly, leadership teams at an organisation have the opportunity to set the tone for the rest of a company when it comes to prioritising mental health. COVID-19 created a period of time where leaders were unable to rely on traditional processes and policies to navigate change. The ever-changing reality and hard decisions leaders needed to make have had implications for many people's wellbeing. Implementing measures that support leadership teams in walking the walk and taking action can help improve the mental health of those in leadership positions, and offer authentic examples of how to do the same for the rest of a company.

More and more, **authenticity, trust and vulnerability** are being recognised as core components of effective leadership (Lopez, 2018). Leaders who are able to show elements of themselves as people can create connections with staff. **Transparency and honesty, empathy, kindness, admitting mistakes, encouraging vulnerability and being okay to even show a sense of humour** are all elements that can help drive connection, impact and positive cultures (Couris, 2020).



## Methodology and APPROACH

This report set out to better understand the role that work plays in the mental health and wellbeing of employees, with a particular focus on young people in the workforce.

Three questions framed our approach:

**'What role does work play in mental health and wellbeing?'**

**'How do young people experience mental health and wellbeing in the workplace?'**

**'What can companies and organisations do to support employee mental health?'**

To understand these questions we did scan of relevant articles and reports, a survey (n=88) and two case studies: one from the perspective of a company, Mirvac, and the other from a young person. We also analysed recommendations from the scan and survey to develop a wellbeing framework with tangible recommendations.

The survey was conducted between October-November 2022. 88 participants completed it with the average age of participants being 29 years old. 58% of participants identified as man or male, 41% as woman or female, and 1% non-binary. The majority of respondents were from corporate/for profit companies, while a smaller proportion was split across not-for-profit, government and social enterprise.

# Survey Findings: A SNAPSHOT



Survey respondents identified the importance of a workplace's approach to mental health and wellbeing as something that has influence on where they work, their continuation of employment at a company, and their engagement with that company.

Survey respondents also shared about relationships with colleagues. Spending large periods of time with colleagues provides us with the opportunity to open up with one another, putting us in a greater position to identify when someone is going through a tough time. When it comes to interactions with colleagues, the following responses were provided in the survey:

Considering nearly 70% of respondents would feel confident having a conversation with a trusted colleague about their own mental health, but less than 60% feel confident in knowing how to support their colleague, an opportunity exists. Organisations can work to better understand how employees are the first point of support for their peers and equip staff with the vocabulary, skills and confidence required to have effective conversations around mental health and wellbeing. This can include helping staff know their role isn't to be a counsellor, but to listen non-judgmentally and encourage their colleague to reach out for support through avenues available at the company.

Through the various analyses conducted for this report, hesitations around EAPs were commonly identified. Reasons included not knowing enough about what a company's EAP is or not wanting to call a number and be met with a stranger. This demonstrates how having access to avenues staff can go down to gain support for a personal or emotional problem is crucial, however consideration of the factors that will increase engagement with a program or activity needs to be a core factor too. The Wellbeing Framework in this report has recommendations that can help support this.

In terms of activities at a company that support staff mental health and wellbeing, respondents indicated:



69% agreed or strongly agreed that a workplace's approach to mental health and wellbeing is a key factor in their decision to work for them



69% agreed or strongly agreed that they would feel confident having a conversation with a trusted colleague about my mental health



95% agreed or strongly agreed that if their workplace prioritises mental health, wellbeing or a healthy workplace culture, they are more likely to continue working for them



58% agreed or strongly agreed that I would feel confident to know how to support a colleague going through mental ill-health



90% agreed or strongly agreed that if their workplace prioritises mental health and wellbeing they are more engaged in their role



54% said they had supported a colleague through mental ill-health at work



54% said that their workplace had successfully implemented new activities or strategies that support staff mental health and wellbeing in the last 18 months. 46% said they hadn't.



38% agreed or strongly agreed that if they were having a personal or emotional problem they would seek help from services offered by their employer (e.g. Employee Assistance Program (EAP)). 31% said that they wouldn't.



# The role of the workplace in mental health & **WELLBEING**

**“Work plays an important role in my mental health and happiness.”**

The shift towards prioritising workplace mental health and wellbeing comes from an increasing understanding of the impact that work can have on our lives. Responses to the survey described the important role work plays in our lives, and how the impact it can have on our mental health and wellbeing sits across a spectrum. Many of those surveyed said that work can have both a positive and negative impact on their wellbeing and nearly **63% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “challenges that come up in my personal life affect how I feel about work.”** There is a clear relationship between the two that exists and needs to be acknowledged.

At one end of this spectrum, when work is going badly, respondents described the detrimental impact on people’s wellbeing and how it can create or exacerbate mental ill-health. Respondents described work as creating stress and anxiety, and making people feel overwhelmed and frustrated. One person said, **“I have worked in jobs that have deeply affected my self-esteem and thus taken a toll on mental health both in and out of work.”** For some people, work had a minimal effect on their mental health and wellbeing, with one person responding: **“Not too much. I generally keep work and outside life separate.”**

Many people also described when work was going well and the environment was a supportive one, that they could thrive and feel happier. Work was described as having the potential to increase feelings of self-worth and make individuals feel valued. They also said that work can make them feel **‘connected to a purpose’** and create feelings of **‘community and belonging’**. A few respondents also described work as a ‘distraction’ from their mental ill-health.

This spectrum between the potential positive and negative impacts of work was also described by some as a balancing act: **“I work in a high stress and very fast paced environment, where I walk the line between feeling challenged and fulfilled, and being stressed and overwhelmed. When things tip too much into the stressful side it actively affects my mental health.”**



# Meaningful vs tokenistic staff wellbeing **INITIATIVES**

**‘A pizza lunch doesn’t fix a capacity problem.’**

In the survey, **72% of people said they can tell if a staff wellbeing initiative is tokenistic.** We asked survey respondents to describe the difference between a tokenistic staff wellbeing initiative and a meaningful one. Here’s what they had to say:

**Tokenistic staff wellbeing initiatives are ‘one off events’ that are ‘short term’ and ‘superficial’.** They are mental health-related emails with ‘no follow-up discussion’, ‘policies that are never actioned’ or plans that are ‘never implemented’. They are just a ‘box tick’ and have a ‘hidden agenda’. They lack ‘genuine compassion’ and are not in the ‘true interest of employees’. They happen when leadership is ‘not on board’ and are ‘not leading by example’. They do not address ‘systemic’ issues’ like ‘increasing workloads’, and they ‘recommend actions that are incompatible

with the requirements of the job’. They are not given proper ‘time’ or ‘resources’. And they occur when ‘stigma [is still] present in the workplace’.

**Meaningful staff wellbeing initiatives are ‘authentic’, show ‘genuine care’ and are ‘built within the culture of the workplace’.** They are ‘consistent’, ‘ongoing’ and involve ‘follow through’. They ‘take time [and] resources’, and are accessible to everyone. They involve ‘regular mental health check-ins’ built on ‘meaningful relationships’ that show help is there ‘when you need it’. They require ‘participation from all levels’, including senior people ‘leading by example’ and showing ‘vulnerability and openness from the top down’. And they are backed by ‘systemic change’.



# Mental health and the manager-employee RELATIONSHIP

**"I spoke with my manager previously about challenges with my mental health and went very much unheard. I am now exploring alternative employment."**

A critical part of creating a workplace that supports the mental health of its employees is having strong relationships between staff and their managers. Transparency about mental health challenges is not always essential, but whether it is present or not can be an indicator of how a workplace approaches the issue. **Just 46% of those surveyed said they would be open with their manager if they were experiencing mental ill-health.** We asked respondents what is important to creating this openness.

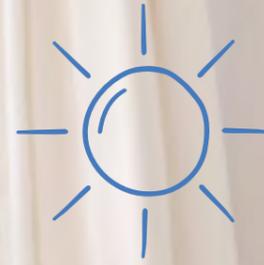
**Building trust** was cited most often, with participants describing mutual respect and honesty as also being very important. Modelling of behaviour including the manager's own ability to be vulnerable was also seen to be important with one respondent saying, **"I also believe vulnerability breeds more vulnerability.** If my manager is open to me about how they are genuinely doing, I will feel more comfortable bringing up the similar topics to them."

Regular check-ins about mental health, and managers showing genuine empathy were also seen to have an impact. One respondent recommended managers do "Regular check-ins when things are ok so that when they are not, the check-in is already established and not awkward."

Building a culture of openness and the impact of stigma were also frequently cited. **58% of survey respondents said they did not agree or they strongly disagreed that they would feel OK about themselves if they had mental ill-health.** Self-stigmatising attitudes towards oneself can prevent people from opening up for fear of judgement, discrimination or negative consequences. Normalising mental health conversations and removing any judgement coming from managers were seen as important examples. A number of respondents described a fear not only of judgement, but of how perceptions of them might change after being open with their manager about their mental health, including repercussions for their career. One person said that it was important to remove "fear of retribution or reputational damage" and another said that in order to be open they "would need to feel as if my manager could keep this separate from how they feel/treat me professionally."

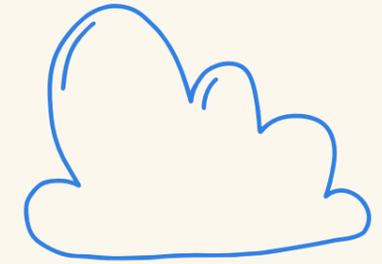
The handling of **disclosures** was key. Responses to disclosures needed to be 'meaningful' and "handled respectfully, empathetically and result in support to continue contributing meaningfully to the organisation's goals."

Staff were also more likely to approach managers if they knew they had been given training in mental health, had a framework to respond effectively, and if they knew that they would advocate on their behalf. Flexibility and control over roles were also mentioned.



# Case Study:

# MIRVAC



## Summary

2022 AFR BOSS Best Places to Work list for the Property, Construction and Transport sector

Ranked number one employer in the world for gender equality by Equileap

In FY 22, retained 96% of key talent and 93% of staff said they are proud to work for Mirvac (November 2022 Employee Engagement Survey)

88% of staff agreed that their manager genuinely cares about their wellbeing (November 2022 Employee Engagement Survey)

## About Mirvac

Founded in 1972, ASX-listed property group Mirvac has built a team of 1,550 employees, guided by the purpose "to reimagine urban life". Over the last 50 years, Mirvac has seen changes not only related to Australia's urban landscape, but in how companies can evolve practices that reflect the needs of their employees. This includes the shifts in recognising the role mental health and wellbeing plays for employees and Australian communities.

### Key enablers to their wellbeing focus and activities:

- Integrating mental health and wellbeing as a standard in company culture
- Measurable action taken by leadership to drive the culture forward
- Flexibility processes and culture implemented with a range of options provided for staff

## Company Culture

At a macro level, mental health and wellbeing is seen to underpin the broader culture of Mirvac. This is considered to create a competitive advantage, with evidence shown in their staff engagement surveys. Mirvac's values such as "we put people first", drive decisions that put measurable actions in practice, and create shifts in staff attitudes and behaviour. Mirvac focuses on how employees can feel a sense of belonging, to be themselves at work.

## Action taken by Leadership and Governance

Minimum leadership expectations are outlined in their Big 5 People Leader Fundamentals. Leaders have clear expectations and responsibilities, with specific activities outlined for each. This includes, knowing and growing your people, and building a high performing and engaged team. Looking after the mental and physical health of staff is an expectation of leaders, to drive forward the company culture and values.

Structurally at Mirvac, mental health sits in the human resources, health and safety functions of the business. This extends to a dedicated focus on mental health which feeds through to the Board Health, Safety, Environment and Sustainability Committee and regular leadership meetings with standing agenda items on employee mental health across Australia.

## Flexibility Processes and Culture

Allowing staff to have autonomy and flexibility over their roles is a core component of Mirvac's strategy for creating a positive place to work. With a view that flexibility will increase gender equality and reduce stress, employees are empowered to have agency in managing work and personal commitments. Mirvac conducted consultations with staff to determine practical things that could be implemented to support this. As an example, in 2016, they integrated simple, individualised plans for everyone to make flexibility a part of the culture. Adopting the activity

"My Simple Thing," staff were encouraged to choose one simple thing that would give them and their teams better work-life quality. Examples included leaving early each Wednesday to coach their child's Australian Rules football team, going to the gym during a time that worked, or going in late to have breakfast with family. By promoting the senior leadership team's 'simple things', including the CEO, it has modelled activities that support wellbeing for all levels of the business.

## Examples of activities implemented by Mirvac:

### EAP Evolution

Sourcing a third party mental health organisation to audit Mirvac's EAP protocols led to evolving their EAP program and bringing Sonder on board as a provider for staff and families. Sonder is a "technology-driven platform supported by safety, medical and mental health experts - available 24/7." (Sonder). Staff are provided with agency to decide if they want to engage with the platform via phone, video call or text, based on their communication preferences. A range of wellbeing resources, self-help tools and real-time prompts on safety for both mental and physical health are also available. Mirvac's visibility over anonymous insights and trends on the platform supports future decision making to improve employee wellbeing.

### In October 2022:

- There were 622 downloads of Sonder (up from September)
- 31 people actively sought intervention from Sonder
- 7am was identified as the peak time for usage

### Connecting meaning to work

Mirvac has established targets and strategies associated with gender equality and the environment that connects people to purpose. A health and safety vision has also been developed that informs their wellbeing and mental health strategy: "To continue to pursue safety excellence and improve the overall wellbeing of our employees, suppliers, communities, and the environment, such that we are recognised as the safest and healthiest organisation in the industries we operate by 2026." Authenticity, accountability and creating respectful teams that work towards these goals are areas they continue to strive towards.

### Promotion of activities and resources offered by Mirvac

Key dates in the global mental health calendar such as R U OK? Day or World Mental Health Day aren't used as the sole days to promote wellbeing. They are instead leveraged to promote activities that can be used year round.

Mirvac also embodies a growth mindset when it comes to acknowledging that there is always room for improvement, reflecting on their practices, gaining ongoing feedback from the wider company, and implementing steps that build on the previous ones are initiatives they take on.

## Case Study:

# Young Person, Leah\*

As a young person in her early 20s, Leah joined a financial services company in Australia through their graduate program. Through this program, graduates were able to try various teams to gain experience across different areas of the business. Specific training on mental wellbeing, including training during orientation, case studies on how to navigate certain situations related to mental health, and education programs from external organisations were provided. The team Leah was a part of had a reputation for having good work life balance and flexibility, even before COVID-19. Leah had leaders who modelled healthy behaviours around mental health, which influenced the culture. This, coupled with the extra training and support the graduate program offered, added to a positive culture and experience.

While Leah was able to open up to managers about her experiences with mental ill-health and what was important to manage it, she noticed this wasn't the case for all her colleagues. Leah would have conversations with colleagues in other departments who would emotionally share about the unrealistic pressures they were facing, such as expectations to work in the middle of the night. It felt as if this pressure came from deep-rooted industry-wide expectations and included the legacy of "what people had to do in the past to earn their stripes" and progress their careers, placing these expectations on newer staff joining the company.

Leah also noticed that while she felt comfortable to talk about her mental health to managers, that wasn't the case for everyone. Although conversations and education around mental health have progressed in recent years, Leah saw that stigma is still prevalent for a lot of people. Leah felt that for some colleagues, even using the words 'mental health' could be too much, but having spaces for little check-ins in meetings or performance reviews, asking how people are feeling, celebrating what people were grateful for and seeing this happen in an ongoing way was valuable.

Despite Leah's positive experiences with many people in the team, her experience talking to HR about a very difficult personal event had a negative impact on her experience at work. During this time, Leah and HR

agreed she would take a sabbatical from work, however the details about the personal event would need to be communicated to a new manager of a team she was about to be moving to. The existing shame Leah already felt in this conversation, coupled with the loss of control and confidentiality affected her decision not to return to the graduate program after the sabbatical. "If employees are coming forward and having the courage to prioritise their mental health, that element of confidentiality is so important."

Leah felt she could have benefited from responses that were based on simple human connection, and instead resonated more with managers who could "strip things down from stressful mandated policies, to light hearted approaches."

From Leah's experiences, the following areas were enablers to positive outcomes related to workplace mental health:

Consideration of the approach to mental health conversations: "It doesn't have to be as intense as saying psychological safety. Even just feeling it's safe within your team that someone asks 'how are you' and you can say it's a bad week instead of using terminology that's mandated and becomes sterile or feels like a chore."

Human connection: "The successful managers I saw are the people who had the human centred approach instead of people who couldn't see beyond policies."

Providing access to services or people to talk to "Knowing there's someone with the right training and their role is to have confidential conversations and give advice on what to do would have been huge for so many people [at the company]."

\*Leah's name is a pseudonym



# Workplace Wellbeing FRAMEWORK

This workplace wellbeing framework can be used by companies and organisations to implement new strategies and initiatives on mental health and wellbeing, or to build and deliver an organisation-wide plan. The framework includes overarching **guiding principles for creating meaningful impact** on workplace mental health and wellbeing, followed by **tangible recommendations which sit under five key pillars**. Included alongside each pillar are **suggested measures** that can track outcomes, create accountability and inform future decision making.

This framework was developed through a scan of the relevant reports and articles that made recommendations on workplace mental health and wellbeing, combined with qualitative data collected as part of our survey which asked respondents to make their own recommendations on how workplaces should approach this area. The data was coded into themes and key trends emerged.

The suggested measures associated with each pillar can help inspire ways of tracking progress over a period of time. Using this data you can

create benchmarks for your company and enable comparisons over time. Seeing fluctuations and trends can help inform decisions around wellbeing initiatives. Measures can be added to staff surveys or 'pulse checks' on a quarterly basis where results are compared, and shared transparently with the team. Adding the results to leadership team agendas to identify opportunities to build on the previous quarter's progress and continuously improve results can also be valuable. Other measures to track progress across all pillars include staff retention and the frequency of lost time injuries.

**Remember that this framework is not prescriptive, every workplace is unique and implementing successful, authentic strategies can take time.** This can also be used as a guide to see what your company might have at its disposal already and what can be done to enhance outcomes with what you already have. Breaking things down into achievable steps that you can build on over time can bring an entire team on the journey together, and allow practices to evolve based on what works best in your own setting.

## Guiding Principles

These three principles underpin the framework's five pillars and provide guidance on what should be considered across any workplace mental health and wellbeing activity to improve its chance of success.

### 1 Take a systems-level approach

and make mental health and wellbeing fundamental to the business, integrating it into the culture, policies, business strategy and structures at all levels. Avoid any tokenism and 'wellbeing washing', and when you say you want to improve the mental health of employees, genuinely do it for their wellbeing, and more than the bottom line.

### 2 Take a human-centred approach

and make sure that at the core of any wellbeing plan, policy or initiative there are strong relationships built on empathy and respect. The workplace can be an amazing protective factor for people's mental health, but it can also be a risk factor, and it's the relationships between people where actual progress is made.

### 3 Take a participatory approach

and include your team in the design and implementation of workplace wellbeing activities. Getting people from all levels of the business involved will ensure what you undertake is driven by the specific needs of your people, and will also increase buy-in and engagement.

**TIP** Try to stay up to date on the latest evidence around workplace wellbeing and embed that into your practice to improve outcomes

## Key Pillars

# LEADERSHIP & ACCOUNTABILITY

Leaders are the lynchpin that determines whether or not any wellbeing activity or plan will succeed.

### Recommendations

- 1 Leaders must define a positive culture around mental health through modelling openness, vulnerability, and by looking after their own mental health
- 2 Leaders including the Board and senior management must make a genuine, ongoing and visible commitment to the critical importance of mental health and wellbeing that results in action
- 3 Develop and deliver a comprehensive, long-term mental health and wellbeing plan that is built into your business strategy. Multiple members of the leadership team should be responsible and it should include mechanisms for accountability and measurement
- 4 Employ managers that genuinely care about their team and can build strong relationships. This includes providing ongoing manager training on interpersonal skills including being able to respond with empathy and without stigma when a team member discloses mental ill-health
- 5 Implement regular wellbeing check-ins between managers and direct reports
- 6 Create safe avenues for anybody to raise issues and provide feedback, then respond quickly and meaningfully
- 7 Have the difficult conversations around burnout and stress, backed by action, including setting clear and reasonable expectations around workload
- 8 Leaders must model good boundaries between work and life, for example around working out of hours

### Suggested measures that can be asked of staff to track progress

(These can be presented on a five-point scale between strongly disagree and strongly agree)

- The leadership team is committed to improving the mental health and wellbeing of the team
- My manager genuinely cares about my wellbeing
- I would be comfortable raising sensitive issues
- The leadership team model good boundaries between work and life

# POLICIES

## and Structures



Promoting the mental health and wellbeing of a workforce can only be sustained if it's built into the foundations of a business.

### Recommendations

- 1 Assess and take action on the structural factors that impact people's wellbeing such as heavy workloads, pressurised timelines, unsustainable role-design, inappropriate team structures and low wages
- 2 Create a flexible working environment where team members have reasonable autonomy over working from home or in the office, as well as their working hours
- 3 Provide employees with adequate leave including sick leave, family leave, parental leave, stress leave and mental health days
- 4 Design roles and structures that allow all team members to have reasonable autonomy and control over their work
- 5 Establish, promote and normalise the use of a psychological support service for all employees whether they identify with having mental ill-health or not. This could be an EAP or another service that meets the needs of your people
- 6 Implement policies that deal with violence and harassment at work and support those who may be experiencing it at home
- 7 Properly resource workplace mental health and wellbeing through financial investment
- 8 Promote paid internships, work experience and graduate programs and training opportunities for young people

### Suggested measures that can be asked of staff to track progress

- I have enough flexibility over my working hours
- I have enough flexibility over where I work from
- I have a reasonable workload
- I have enough autonomy within my role to do it in a way that works for me
- If I was experiencing a social, emotional or mental health problem I would access my workplace psychological support service
- I feel safe at work from violence and harassment
- Also: Uptake numbers on the workplace psychological support service



# CULTURE

Workplace culture can both support and diminish people's mental health, and everyone is responsible for shaping it.

### Recommendations

- 1 Create a culture of openness and normalise conversations about mental ill-health including encouraging help-seeking through the services that are available
- 2 Implement stigma-reduction strategies and programs across the whole business aimed at the three types of stigma:
  - Self-stigma - internalised stigmatised attitudes such as shame and embarrassment
  - Public stigma - stigmatised attitudes towards others such as judgement and fear
  - Structural stigma - policies and processes that are built on stigmatised attitudes such as self-imposed inflexible deadlines for people experiencing mental ill-health
- 3 Communicate clearly and continuously about mental health and wellbeing including promoting initiatives and encouraging engagement with them from all levels
- 4 Connect the work to meaning and purpose and show team members how they are contributing to a mission and making a difference e.g. through corporate social responsibility
- 5 Establish good boundaries between work and life, for example around working out of hours
- 6 Encourage people to use their entitlements and never make people feel judged or guilty for taking leave
- 7 Encourage breaks, time-off and rest for everyone at all levels of a business
- 8 Challenge toxic behaviour or bullying culture at any level of the business head on

### Suggested measures that can be asked of staff to track progress

- I'm comfortable being open about my wellbeing at work
- There is mental health stigma within my workplace
- I am proud to work for [company name]
- I can maintain good boundaries between work and life
- Toxic behaviour and bullying is dealt with properly in my workplace

# Supporting people THROUGH MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

Despite how normal it is to have mental ill-health, stigma still warps how we respond to it. We must be dedicated to changing this.

## Recommendations

- 1 Allow people dealing with mental ill-health greater flexibility in terms of their working hours, deadlines and deliverables
- 2 If someone has taken time off for mental ill-health, work with them on a plan for return to work including reasonable adjustments and a phased approach
- 3 Offer psychological services that provide ongoing support to someone returning from work after an absence due to mental ill-health, such as through an EAP
- 4 Provide mental health first aid training for those interested as well as managers to respond to team members in distress
- 5 Follow-up with regular check-ins from managers for people dealing with mental ill-health
- 6 Consider providing extra support and flexibility for managers and staff following any critical incidents, disruptive events or challenging periods
- 7 Recognise and support team members who provide care for someone with mental ill-health including parents
- 8 Maintain confidentiality for anyone experiencing mental ill-health and ensure staff know they can expect their confidentiality to be respected
- 9 Introduce supported employment initiatives for people with severe mental illness

### Suggested measures that can be asked of staff to track progress

- Conduct a reflection and review of processes with interested team members who have experienced mental ill-health that has led to them being open with their manager (or not), accessing services and/or taking time off work



# Wellbeing and THRIVING



Mental health sits along a spectrum from poor mental health to thriving, and workplaces play a role in helping people be their best selves.

## Recommendations

- 1 Create community and authentic connection through opportunities to socialise and build a culture of authenticity, support and collaboration
- 2 Implement mental health literacy training for all team members including utilising external experts
- 3 Create an office space that encourages people to come in, by building connections with other team members, activities and/or an inviting environment
- 4 Promote the use of mindfulness activities and embed them into everyday work practices
- 5 Train team members in stress management techniques
- 6 Provide opportunities for physical activity including for leisure and exercise
- 7 Provide opportunities for development and train managers to enable their staff to grow
- 8 Recognise and reward good work

### Suggested measures that can be asked of staff to track progress

- There is someone at work that cares about me
- I believe when I do good work it is recognised
- Also: Evaluate the success of different wellbeing initiatives through both quantitative and qualitative outcome measures that relate to each activity

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