

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING AT WORK

Public sector
March 2020



The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The registered charity champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 150,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

Public sector

Health and well-being at work

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1 The current picture

Nearly two-thirds of organisations take a strategic approach to well-being

This summary presents key findings from the CIPD's 2020 Health and Well-Being at Work survey, focusing specifically on the public sector. It looks at how public sector organisations approach well-being, the challenges they face, the methods and steps they are taking, and the perceived impact and effectiveness of their efforts.

Figure 1: Organisations' approaches to well-being



Nearly three-quarters of public sector respondents agree their senior leaders have employee well-being on their agenda (private sector 56%; non-profits 63%) and they are more likely than those from the private or non-profit sectors to report that their organisation takes a strategic approach to employee well-being by having a standalone well-being strategy (63%; private sector: 37%; non-profits: 41%). Nevertheless, over a third of public sector respondents report their organisation is much more reactive than proactive.

Mental health remains the most common focus of well-being activity

The public sector is most likely to try to take a holistic approach to employee well-being compared with other sectors. The vast majority of public sector respondents (86%) report their well-being activity is designed to promote mental health to a large or moderate extent, in line with findings from other sectors. The majority of the public sector also attempt to promote physical health (76%), values/principles (71%), good work (69%), collective/social relationships (64%), good lifestyle choices (64%) and personal growth (64%), at least to a moderate extent. Just two-fifths (41%), however, focus on financial well-being to a large or moderate extent (as in the private and non-profit sectors).

Figure 2: Reported common mental health conditions

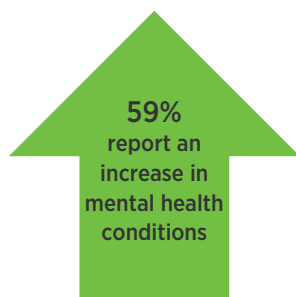
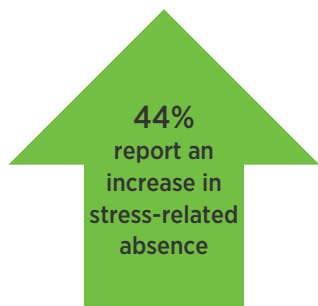


Figure 3: Stress-related absence

Mental health conditions are prevalent and increasing

Three-fifths of public sector respondents (and a similar proportion of those from other sectors) have seen an increase in reported common mental health conditions among employees in the last 12 months. Moreover, mental ill health remains among the top causes of long-term absence for all sectors. Two-thirds (67%) of public sector organisations include it among their top three most common causes of long-term absence (private sector: 56%; non-profits: 57%) and three in ten (30%) also include it among their top three causes of short-term absence.

Figure 3: Stress-related absence



Stress-related absence is particularly prevalent in the public sector

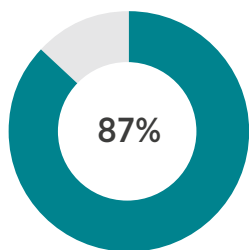
Over two-fifths of public sector organisations report that stress-related absence (most commonly caused by heavy workloads) has increased over the last 12 months (44%, compared with 36% of the private and 33% of non-profits). Stress is the most common cause of long-term absence in the public sector: seven in ten organisations (70%) include it among their top causes of long-term absence compared with just 38% of private sector and 43% of non-profit organisations. Half of public

sector organisations (50%) also include it among their top causes of short-term absence, compared with just a third of the private sector (33%) and 38% of non-profits.

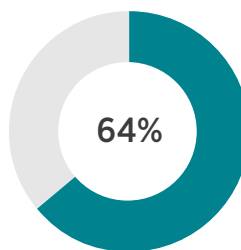
‘Presenteeism’ and ‘leaveism’ are common

‘Presenteeism’ (people coming to work when unwell) and ‘leaveism’ (for example, people working outside contracted hours, or using annual leave to work/for illness) are critical indicators of the health of an organisation’s culture. These unhealthy workplace practices have serious potential implications for employees’ physical and mental health, as well as for productivity. Our findings show that both ‘presenteeism’ and ‘leaveism’ remain widespread in the public sector (as in the private and ‘non-profit’ sectors).

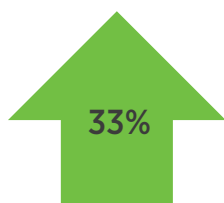
Figure 4: Presenteeism and leaveism in organisations



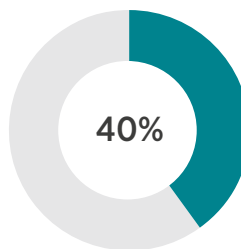
Almost nine in ten have observed ‘presenteeism’ over the last year.



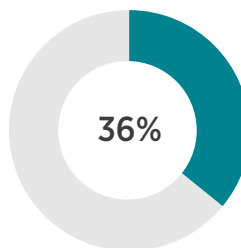
Almost two-thirds report that employees work outside contracted hours to get work done.



A third report that ‘presenteeism’ has increased over the last year.



Two-fifths report that employees use allocated time off (for example holiday) when unwell.



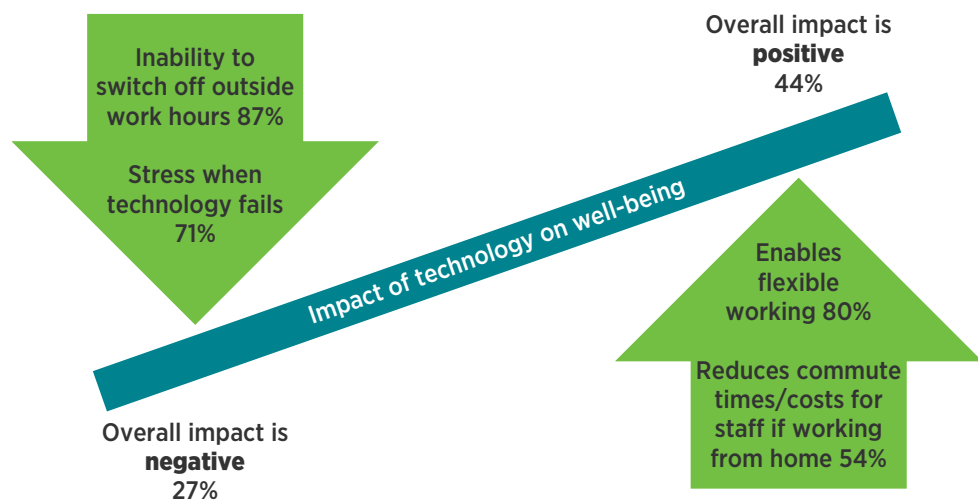
More than a third report that employees use allocated time off (for example holiday) to work.

Technology has both positive and negative effects on well-being

Most public sector respondents believe that technology has both positive and negative effects on employee well-being in their organisation, in line with other broad sectors. More public sector respondents report the overall impact is positive, in line with other sectors, largely through facilitating flexible working and reducing commute times (see Figure 5).

The main adverse effects (the inability to switch off out of work hours and stress when technology fails) are similar to previous findings. This year, however, more public sector respondents report that technology has had a negative impact on well-being as a consequence of less face-to-face interaction reducing the quality of communication (2020: 64%; 2018: 55%).

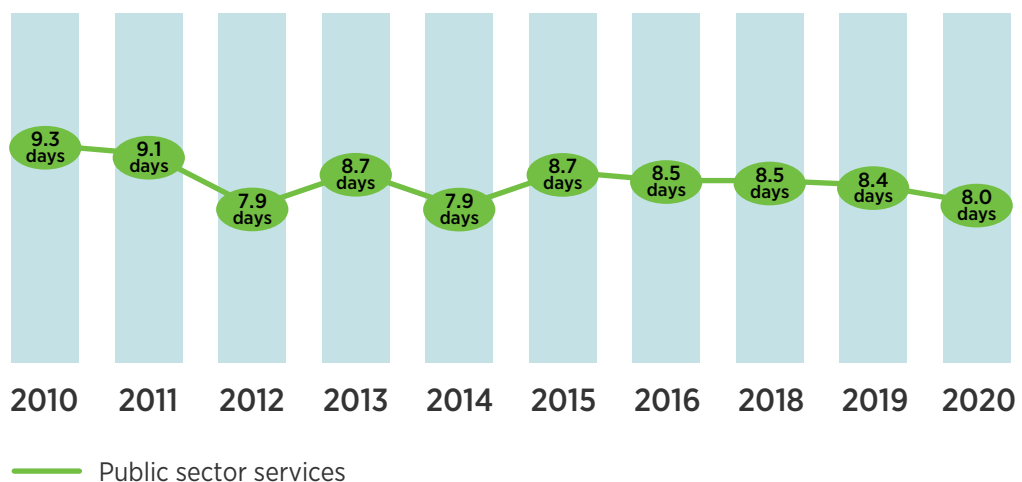
Figure 5: Impact of technology on well-being (Base: 191)



Absence levels are considerably higher in the public sector despite a small reduction this year

The average level of absence in the public sector has fallen from 8.4 days per employee last year to eight days this year, although it remains considerably higher than in other sectors (private services sector: 4.3 days; manufacturing and production: 6.3 days; non-profit sector: 5.2 days) (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Average number of days lost per employee per year, by sector (5% trimmed mean)



Base: 100 (2020); 109 (2019); 107 (2018); 194 (2016); 105 (2015); 88 (2014); 106 (2013); 145 (2012); 138 (2011); 119 (2010)

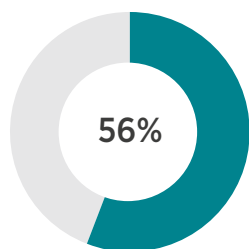
2 Action taken to improve employee well-being

The public sector uses more approaches to promote well-being and manage absence

Public sector organisations are more likely to use a range of methods to promote well-being and manage absence compared with their counterparts in the private and non-profit sectors. They are more likely to provide health promotion benefits (such as well-being days, exercise/relaxation classes and free flu vaccinations). They are also more likely to provide support to employees through employee assistance programmes, counselling services, occupational health services, risk assessments to aid return to work and a case management approach, although they are less likely than the private sector to provide health insurance. The public sector is also more proactive in attempting to monitor and deter absence through trigger mechanisms to review attendance and disciplinary procedures for unacceptable absence.

The public sector is more likely than other sectors to focus on health and well-being as part of their approach to absence management; moreover, we have seen an increase in the proportion of public sector respondents doing so this year (2020: 67%; 2019: 59%).

Figure 7: Line managers and well-being



Say line managers have bought into employee well-being.

Line managers play a key role in managing absence

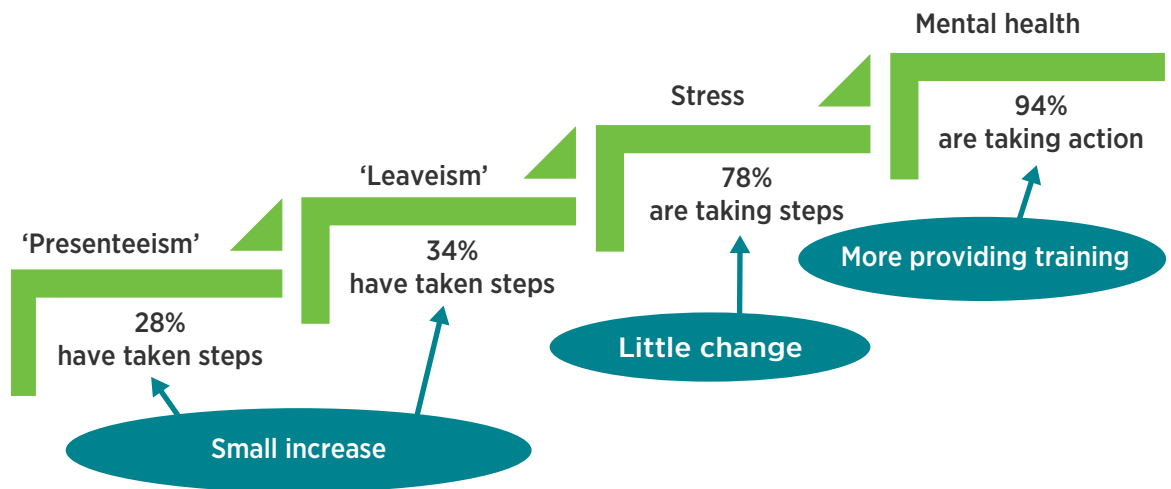
Line managers in the public sector are more likely to have a prominent role in managing sickness absence compared with those in the private sector: four-fifths of the public sector (81%) report that line managers have primary responsibility for short- and/or long-term absence compared with just over half

of the private sector (55%) and three-fifths of non-profits (61%). Three-quarters of public sector organisations provide line managers with training in absence handling (76%) and provide them with tailored support (76%). However, less than three-fifths (56%) of public sector respondents agree that line managers in their organisation have bought into the importance of employee well-being (private sector: 57%; non-profits: 68%).

Public sector organisations are more active in tackling stress and mental ill health

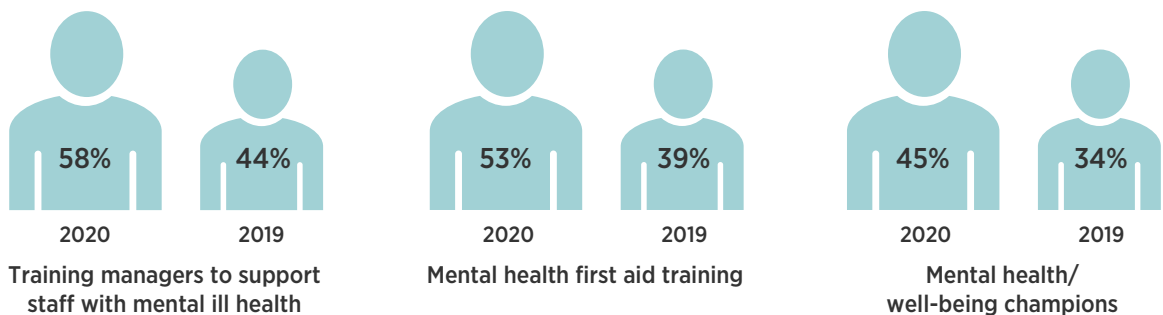
Public sector organisations remain more active than those in the private or non-profit sectors in their efforts to promote mental health and tackle workplace stress, including tackling 'leaveism' and 'presenteeism' (see Figure 8). In particular, public sector organisations are more likely to attempt to identify the causes of stress through risk assessments/stress audits (77%; private sector: 40%; non-profits: 54%). They are also more likely than private or non-profit organisations to attempt to both promote mental health and reduce stress through flexible working options/improved work-life balance, training aimed at building personal resilience and stress management training for the whole workforce.

Figure 8: Proportion of public sector organisations taking action on well-being



This year's findings suggest that an increasing proportion of public sector organisations are stepping up their efforts to promote good mental health through training managers to support staff with mental ill health, providing mental health first aid training and having a network of mental health well-being champions.

Figure 9: Mental health interventions in organisations



Small increase in efforts to reduce 'presenteeism' and 'leaveism'

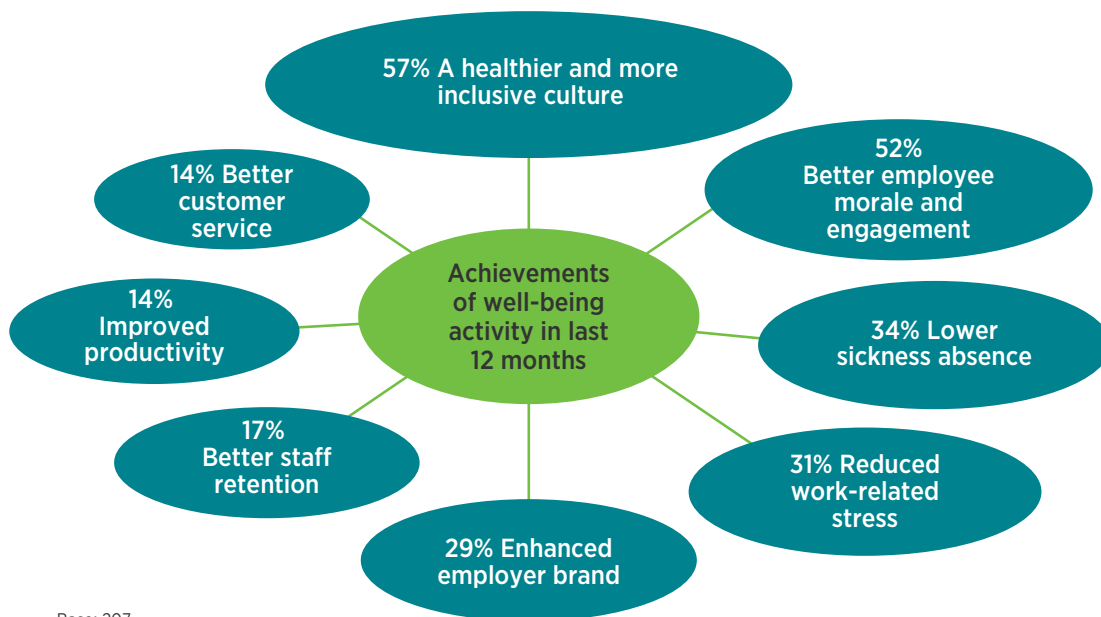
Despite the widespread prevalence of 'presenteeism' and 'leaveism' in public sector organisations, just over a third (34%) are taking steps to discourage 'leaveism' and even fewer (28%) are taking steps to discourage 'presenteeism' (see Figure 8). Nevertheless, these figures are a small improvement on the previous few years ('presenteeism': 2020: 28%; 2019: 23%; 2018: 21%; and 'leaveism': 2020: 34%; 2019: 27%; 2018: 22%).

3 The impact and effectiveness of well-being initiatives

Well-being activity boosts healthier cultures

Our findings show that well-being activity results in healthier cultures in public sector organisations, but is less effective at reducing employee absence or stress.

Figure 10: Impact of well-being activity in the public sector



Base: 207

Three-fifths of public sector respondents agree that their organisation actively promotes good mental well-being and is effective at supporting people with mental ill health. However, just a third agree that senior leaders encourage a focus on mental well-being through their actions and behaviour, and less than a fifth that managers have the skills to spot the early warning signs of mental ill health.

Figure 11: How well do organisations support good mental health?



More positively, we have seen an increase this year in the proportion of public sector respondents who agree that staff are well informed about mental health risks and symptoms (2020: 45%; 2019: 32%). These findings are similar in the private and non-profit sectors

4 Looking forward

Public sector organisations are more strategic and proactive in their approach to promoting health and well-being compared with those in other sectors. This year, we have also seen an increase in the proportion that are taking a more proactive approach to absence management, through focusing on employee health and well-being, and more are stepping up their efforts to promote good mental health.

Nevertheless, the majority are making little headway in reducing workplace stress, which remains a particular issue in public sector organisations, many of which have experienced budget, resource and staff reductions over the last few years. Mental ill health, 'presenteeism' and 'leaveism' are widespread, and absence levels remain considerably higher than in other sectors despite a small reduction this year.

Key insights and recommendations for the public sector

Our findings highlight the need for a comprehensive and holistic approach to employee well-being:

- Understand and address organisational threats to well-being. Counselling services, or other initiatives such as mindfulness or resilience training, will have limited impact if employees return to a stressful or unsupportive working environment.
- Ensure people's roles, responsibilities and priorities are clear, and that workloads are manageable. Increasing employees' control over their working pattern, including through flexible working practices, can also help to reduce stress and aid well-being.
- Establish protocols for the use of technology, particularly out of work hours, to ensure people don't feel under pressure to be digitally tethered to the workplace when not working. Consider the impact of communication practices on well-being.
- Review how the wider organisational culture and working practices impact on well-being. Do recognition practices or management behaviour reinforce a long hours' culture? Do employees feel appreciated and connected at work? How does remuneration affect financial well-being?
- Ensure that leaders and line managers role-model healthy practices and take action to address 'presenteeism' and 'leaveism'. These are not the signs of a healthy workplace, and people need to have adequate time to relax and recharge.
- Maintain a strong focus on the importance of employee well-being through regular reviews of the costs of employee ill health and the positive impact of well-being activity. Having senior leaders and line managers fully on board with this agenda is critical to ensure that policies and practices are clearly communicated and understood, embedded in the culture and consistently applied throughout the organisation.



CIPD

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
151 The Broadway London SW19 1JQ United Kingdom
T +44 (0)20 8612 6200 **F** +44 (0)20 8612 6201
E cipd@cipd.co.uk **W** cipd.co.uk

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