2024 WORKPLACE WELL-BEING REPORT

HR Misses the Mark with Employee Mental Health

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INTRODUCTION

Whether it's from inflation, the long-tail effects of the pandemic, the environment, or wars and the polarization of politics, feeling worried and overwhelmed is common. Workers fear lay-offs or the automation of their jobs. Plus, many employees feel they are stuck in jobs with unrealistic demands and struggle with stress and burnout.

All of this is causing negative effects on employee well-being, including mental health. When employees face mental health challenges, this can translate to employee dissatisfaction and poor productivity, which are costly for employers. As one example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in 2022 that depression is estimated to cause 200 million lost workdays each year.[1]

Most organizations recognize the importance of workplace well-being for employee satisfaction and performance. Companies have been making considerable investments to better support employee mental well-being. The Guardian recently reported that "Companies around the world spent $61.2 billion on wellness interventions in 2021. That amount is projected to grow to $94.6 billion in 2026."[2]

Yet mental health conditions are still on the rise among adults.

- **37% of Americans rated their mental health as fair or poor in 2022, up from 31% in 2021.** *American Psychiatric Association[3]*

- **45% of 35-44-year-olds had a mental health diagnosis in 2023, vs. 31% in 2019.** *American Psychological Association[4]*

- **78% of 3,400 employees surveyed across 10 countries said in 2023 that stress negatively impacts their work performance.** *Workforce Institute at UKG[5]*

Whether employees find it difficult to access the benefits and programs being offered, or organizations are not getting at issues causing stress and burnout at work, the current approaches to mental health in the workplace are not meeting the mark.

Solving the mental health crisis is complex. There are many factors that influence a person's mental wellness. Rates of mental health challenges are higher for women, Black, Latino, and multi-racial individuals, and those in lower socioeconomic groups. Mental health conditions can be challenging to identify and treat. The stigma around mental health persists, preventing people from sharing their challenges or asking for help. Plus, employers don't have control over many of the factors that affect mental wellness.

In our 2024 Workplace Well-being study, we examined well-being and specifically, mental health, through a survey of HR leaders and knowledge workers across the U.S. Our findings revealed how HR leaders and knowledge workers see the state of mental wellness at their organizations and actions organizations and practical actions leaders can take to help employees with mental health challenges and contribute to their overall well-being.

STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

About the Study

Executive Networks surveyed 500 HR leaders and 500 knowledge workers in the United States between November 22nd and December 3rd, 2023. Survey participants were evenly distributed between large, small, and mid-sized organizations and came from varied industries.

FIGURE 1: Study Demographics

GENDER	AGE	US REGION	COMPANY SIZE	EMPLOYEE TYPE
■ Man (530)	■ Gen Z (18-24) (43)	■ Northeast (168)	■ Small (under 1,000) (324)	■ HR Leaders (500)
■ Woman (465)	■ Millenials (25-40) (336)	■ Midwest (215)	■ Mid-size (1,000-9,999) (339)	■ Knowledge Workers (500)
■ Other (5)	■ Gen X (41-56) (435)	■ South (406)	■ Large (10,000+) (337)	
	■ Boomers (57-75) (186)	■ West (211)		

2024 Workplace Well-being Report Data Highlights

8 out of 10 HR leaders are positive about their organization's well-being — but only **57%** of knowledge workers are.

1/3 of knowledge workers say their current job has a negative effect on their well-being.

68% of those surveyed feel there are repercussions on the job for seeking professional counseling.

• •

"Employees will flourish–and be their most productive– when they work within a fair and caring culture and have both work and life satisfaction. Leadership can play a critical role by making well-being and mental health part of the organizational conversation."

~ Marie Gill,
COO, Executive Networks and
Co-founder, Florens: A Flourishing Collective

KEY FINDINGS: WHAT EMPLOYERS NEED TO KNOW

1. There is a major well-being gap between leaders and workers.
2. Many aspects of a person's job impact their well-being.
3. The wide array of benefits offered aren't solving the challenge for many.
4. Employees expect repercussions at work for seeking mental health support.
5. Employees look to leaders when it comes to mental health and well-being.

"We have the power to make workplaces engines for mental health and well-being. Doing so will require organizations to rethink how they protect workers from harm, foster a sense of connection among workers, show them that they matter, make space for their lives outside work, and support their long-term professional growth."[6]

~ Vivek H. Murthy, M.D., M.B.A.
Vice Admiral,
U.S. Public Health Service Surgeon General of the United States
The U.S. Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being

#1

There is a major well-being gap between leaders and workers.

Our research revealed a major gap between HR leaders and knowledge workers when it comes to the state of workplace well-being–both in personal experience and overall perceptions of the organizations. Leaders are faring better than workers when it comes to individual well-being. HR leaders are also more inclined to embrace positive workplace sentiments and have a more favorable perception of how their company addresses mental health concerns in the workplace.

>>> Headlines

83% of HR leaders rate the overall well-being of employees at their organization as good or very good, while only **56%** of knowledge workers do.

HR leaders score significantly higher when rating their personal overall well-being (8.3) than knowledge workers (6.82).

84% of HR leaders say their current job has a positive impact on their personal well-being, while only **57%** of knowledge workers say the same.

FIGURE 2: **HR Leaders Rate Their Well-Being Higher Than Knowledge Workers**
Respondents rated their well-being the past six months on a continuum, with the high end representing "excellent." More HR leaders placed themselves in the top 3 boxes.

HR Leaders
80%

Knowledge Workers
40%
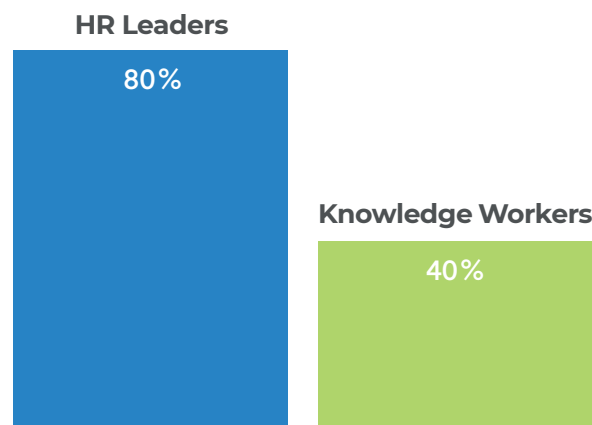
SOURCE: Executive Networks 2024 Workplace Well-being Report

FIGURE 3: **More HR Leaders' Jobs Have a Positive Impact on Well-being**
We asked both knowledge workers and HR leaders what impact their current job has on their well-being. HR leaders had a more positive response.
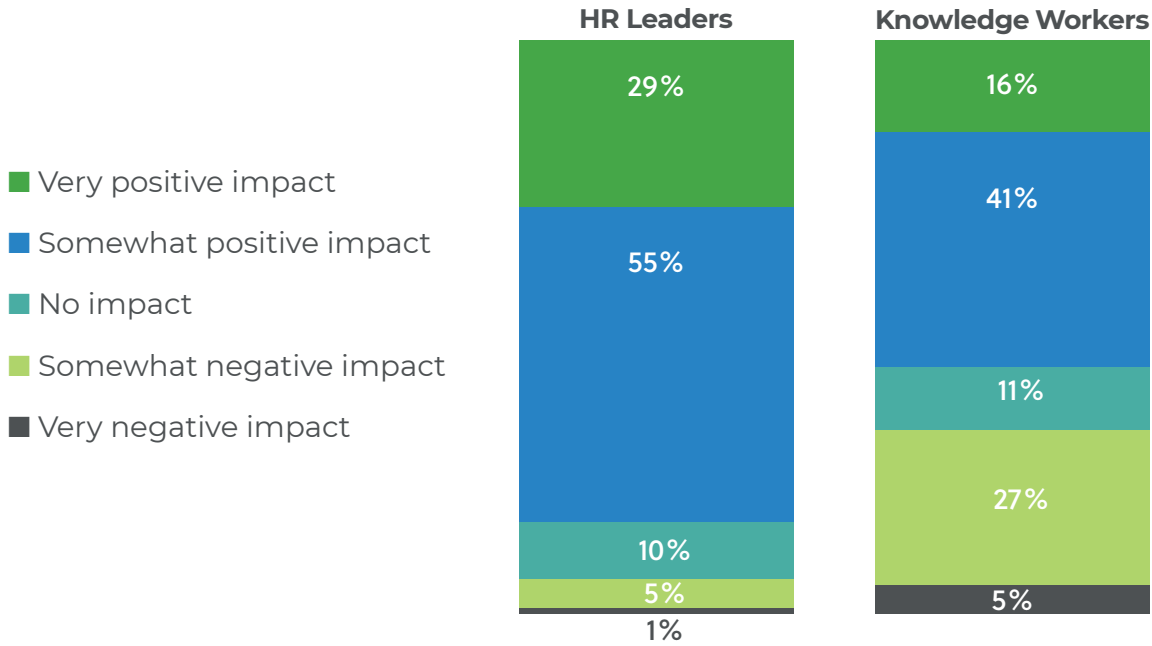
HR Leaders

Category	HR Leaders
Very positive impact	29%
Somewhat positive impact	55%
No impact	10%
Somewhat negative impact	5%
Very negative impact	1%

Knowledge Workers

Category	Knowledge Workers
Very positive impact	16%
Somewhat positive impact	41%
No impact	11%
Somewhat negative impact	27%
Very negative impact	5%

- ■ Very positive impact
- ■ Somewhat positive impact
- ■ No impact
- ■ Somewhat negative impact
- ■ Very negative impact

SOURCE: Executive Networks 2024 Workplace Well-being Report

Many aspects of a person's job impact their well-being.

Organizations should take a holistic view when deciding where to focus to enhance the well-being of their employees. The World Health Organization defines work-related stress as the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope. Stress often is worse when employees feel they have little support from supervisors and colleagues, as well as little control over how work gets done.

When we asked employees what job factors have the biggest influence on well-being, work-life balance topped the list, followed by a good relationship with their managers, and a reasonable workload. It's also notable that while HR leaders and knowledge workers placed the same factors in their top three, the influence of these factors varied based on role, age, gender, and work environment.

>>> Headlines

Work-life balance was the most important factor for well-being overall, and even more so with female HR leaders (50%) than with male HR leaders (38%).

½ of female knowledge workers (48%) say a "good relationship with my manager" contributes most to well-being compared with 36% of male workers.

Knowledge workers in hybrid work environments (64%) are more likely to say their job has a positive impact on their well-being than fully remote (53%) or fully in-the-office (56%) workers.

FIGURE 4: Leaders and Workers Name the Same Top Contributors to Well-being
Knowledge workers and HR leaders had the same top 3, but HR leaders pointed to a larger mix of factors that contribute to their well-being.

	HR Leaders	Knowledge Workers
Work-life balance	42%	58%
Good relationship with my manager	35%	43%
Reasonable workload/hours of work required	30%	38%
Fair and realistic job expectations	30%	33%
Autonomy, control over how I do my job	28%	29%
Stronger senior leadership I trust	28%	15%
Healthy team dynamics	28%	26%
Clear ad well-defined job expectations	27%	24%
Company values align with my own	26%	15%
Organizational support for employees	25%	15%

The wide array of benefits offered aren't solving the challenge for many.

How people cope with mental health challenges and what they find helpful varies widely. Organizations need to better understand the unique needs of different groups across their organization. Mental health risks can be more prominent for certain groups and following particular life events. One solution certainly does not fit all, and requirements change over time. Strikingly, many organizations don't provide any of the well-being offerings presented in our survey.
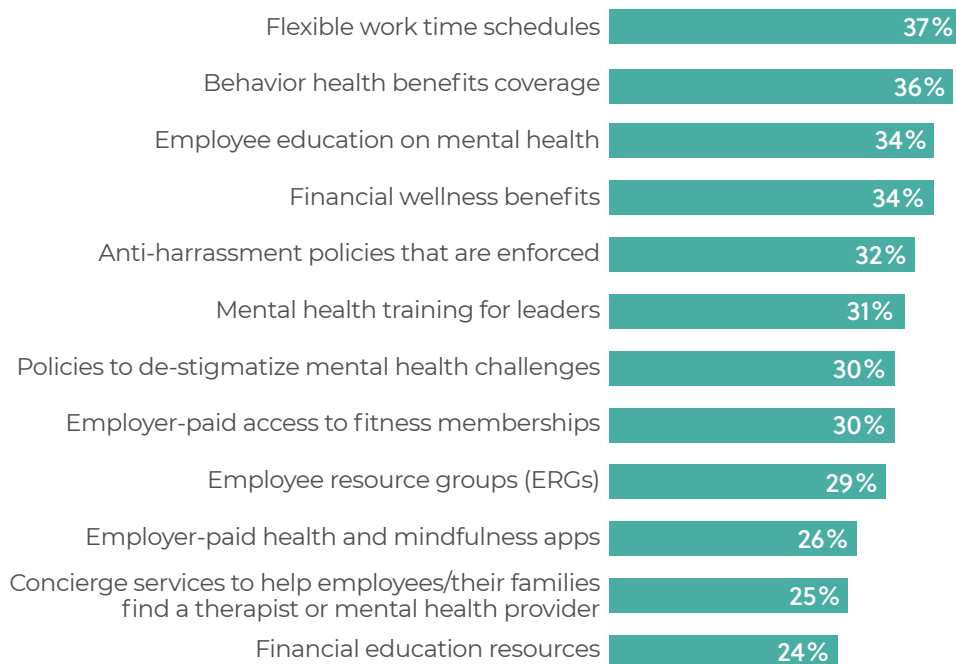
>>> Headlines

> More than 80% of HR Leaders say it is "very important" or "extremely important" to offer well-being resources in the workplace. This held across all organization sizes, genders, and generations.
>
> Only 36% of organizations surveyed offer behavioral health benefits to employees.

FIGURE 5:
The Majority of Organizations Surveyed Aren't Offering Well-being Interventions

HR leaders told us about a wide variety of offerings, but only about a third of the organizations are currently providing them to employees.

Offering	Percentage
Flexible work time schedules	37%
Behavior health benefits coverage	36%
Employee education on mental health	34%
Financial wellness benefits	34%
Anti-harrassment policies that are enforced	32%
Mental health training for leaders	31%
Policies to de-stigmatize mental health challenges	30%
Employer-paid access to fitness memberships	30%
Employee resource groups (ERGs)	29%
Employer-paid health and mindfulness apps	26%
Concierge services to help employees/their families find a therapist or mental health provider	25%
Financial education resources	24%

SOURCE: Executive Networks 2024 Workplace Well-being Report

FIGURE 6: Organizations Need to Adapt Well-being Interventions for Distinct Needs
In our survey, women and younger workers struggle more with well-being. This chart shows the percentage that said their well-being was excellent— in the top 3 boxes of the continuum.

Percentage Who Rate Their Well-being at or Near "Excellent"

	Men*	Women*
HR Leaders	85%	69%
Knowledge Workers	50%	34%
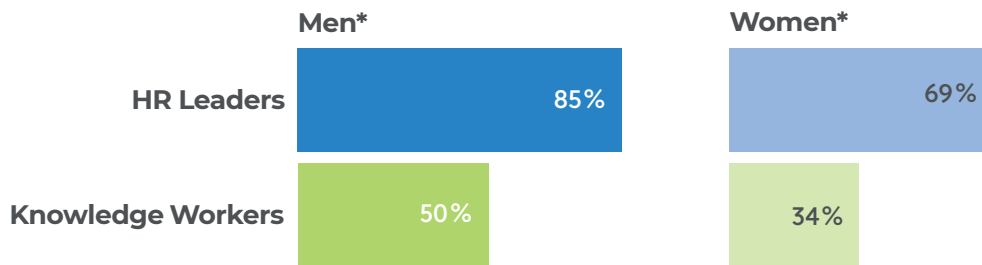
*Non-binary individuals and those who preferred to self-describe gender were not a statistically significant sample.

SOURCE: Executive Networks 2024 Workplace Well-being Report

"In cultivating a thriving workplace, we must prioritize well-being by acknowledging that every facet of an individual's role influences their mental health. Going beyond the range of traditional benefits, a paradigm shift is essential to eliminate the fear of consequences associated with seeking help. As leaders, we carry the responsibility not only to openly discuss our commitment to mental health but to take tangible actions, fostering a culture that promotes professional development and protects the inherent value of each employee, thereby promoting and inspiring overall well-being."

~ Raghu Krishnaiah
Chief Operating Officer
University of Phoenix

#4

Employees expect repercussions at work for seeking mental health support.

Fear of stigma and repercussions keep people from speaking up or asking for help with mental health challenges. Our study found that most HR leaders fear repercussions for openly seeking mental health supports at work, especially men. Commonly expected repercussions include being treated differently by colleagues or supervisors, a change in job assignment, or being passed over for promotion. Perhaps because of different expectations or experiences, younger workers are most likely to expect repercussions on the job for seeking professional counseling.

>>> Headlines

Among HR leaders, 75% of men and 56% of women feel there are repercussions on the job for seeking professional counseling.

44% of Gen Z knowledge workers feel there are repercussions compared with only 27% of Millennials and 23% of Gen X workers, and 22% of Boomers.

1 in 5 of the HR leaders and knowledge workers that expect repercussions for seeking counseling see being fired is a possible result.

Knowledge workers in professional services were the most likely to expect repercussions out of all the industries surveyed.

FIGURE 7: Perception vs. Reality: Mental Health Stigma Persists

Overall perceptions of how mental health challenges affect an organization don't line up with the realities for those with individual lived experience.

PERCEPTION HR Leaders on How Mental Health Challenges Impact the Organization	REALITY Individuals Who Have Experienced Mental Health Challenges Describe the Impact
39% say employees take more sick days	**20%** say they have taken more sick days
35% say employees work fewer hours	**14%** say they have worked fewer hours
45% say employees find it more difficult to work with other team members	**31%** say they find it more difficult to work with other team members

SOURCE: Executive Networks 2024 Workplace Well-being Report

Employees look to leaders when it comes to mental health and well-being.

Our research shows how influential the actions of leaders can be in creating a culture that is supportive to well-being. People look to management for guidance and support when they are going through rough times. Employees, especially men, are more likely to talk about mental health challenges and to seek help when they have seen leaders modeling mental wellness care, talking about mental health challenges, and seeking help themselves. Yet many workers report their supervisors don't encourage openly talking about mental well-being at work.

>>> Headlines

> 74% of HR leaders and 48% of knowledge workers would be more likely to seek professional counseling if they heard a leader at their organization share their experience doing the same.
>
> The percentages climb for HR leaders at larger organizations (83%) and male HR leaders (78%).
>
> While 86% of HR leaders say they encourage open discussions with their team members about stress and anxiety at work, just over 1/2 of knowledge workers say that's true about their own manager.

Are managers encouraging conversations about mental health?

86% **of HR leaders** say yes	Only **56%** of **knowledge workers** agree

Former **Starbucks President Howard Behar** says he has opened up about his mental health struggles because, "I hope it helps inspire others who might be struggling to seek out help and/or help folks feel not so alone." (LinkedIn)

"Leadership is key in fostering a positive and supportive environment for the well-being of the employees. That may be something as simple as addressing everyday concerns and letting them know they are heard." **HR Leader**	*"Leadership could play a very strong role in cultivating a sense of mental health well-being in our organization, but they mostly talk about it and don't do anything substantial. They could be much more proactive."* **Knowledge Worker**

HOW LEADERS CAN HELP WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH

#1 Encourage a supportive culture of well-being

- Foster a trusted and open environment, so employees feel safe seeking help.
- Promote policies and practices that reduce stress.
- Offer paid time off for mental illness as for physical illness.
- Design programs that support leaders to demonstrate their well-being and empower them in service of those they lead.

"Employees should feel safe about seeking physical and mental health help without concern for their job."

Boomer knowledge worker

#2 Have reasonable and flexible work expectations

- Pulse check team members' workload and stress levels.
- Redistribute work when it's unbalanced.
- Adapt expectations for health or personal issues.

"When a workspace becomes way too focused on getting a job done at the cost of someone's well-being, that's too far. With understaffing issues, this only accelerates the burnout and poor mental health."

Gen Z knowledge worker

#3 Model mental wellness care

- Make mental well-being part of team conversations.
- Be open about your own mental health.
- Share resources.

"I let my employees know that work shouldn't be their entire life or damage their mental health. It's my job to give them safe spaces to admit when something is wrong so we can accommodate."

Gen X HR Leader

#4 Listen and empathize with employees

- Make time for regular 1:1 mental wellness check-ins.
- Listen with an open mind.
- Make an effort to relate to employees' situations.
- Learn how to identify subtle signals of mental distress.

"If managers showed compassion and understanding they could play a huge role in helping others with their mental health. Especially when it's affected by work."

Gen X knowledge worker

#5 Cultivate connections across hybrid teams

- Recognize effort across the team and celebrate wins.
- Encourage informal communication channels.
- Find ways to bring teams together in person.
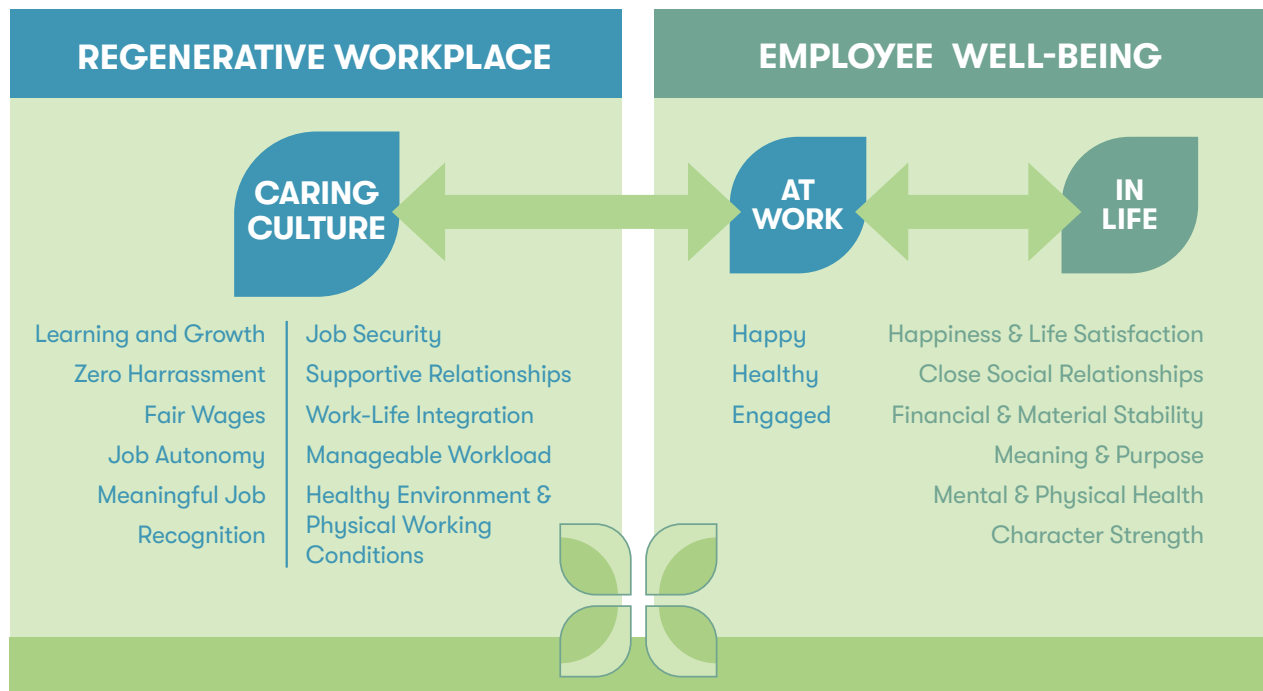- Provide training and support targeting team leaders.

"We need to build a strong team culture that fosters relationships among employees."

Millennial HR Leader

A VISION FOR A RESILIENT AND FLOURISHING CULTURE

What should organizations be striving to achieve? The Harvard Flourishing Network and FLORENS, a Flourishing Collective, describe regenerative workplaces where employees flourish. They define "flourishing" most simply as "the state in which all aspects of a person's life are good." Thet have published a framework that draw on the most recent research on how to employee well-being and the factors in the workplace with the biggest impact.[10, 11]

FLOURISHING FRAMEWORK

REGENERATIVE WORKPLACE		EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING	
CARING CULTURE		**AT WORK**	**IN LIFE**
Learning and Growth	Job Security	Happy	Happiness & Life Satisfaction
Zero Harrassment	Supportive Relationships	Healthy	Close Social Relationships
Fair Wages	Work-Life Integration	Engaged	Financial & Material Stability
Job Autonomy	Manageable Workload		Meaning & Purpose
Meaningful Job	Healthy Environment & Physical Working Conditions		Mental & Physical Health
Recognition			Character Strength

SOURCE: FLORENS

Forward-looking organizations are taking proactive measures to support employees across all of these areas. One strong example is MetLife, an organization that reports progress on many aspects of the employee experience in their annual sustainability report.[12] Areas of focus include building a culture of trust and inclusion, global diversity, equity and inclusion, and holistic well-being.

"When leaders talk about mental health and promote the use of company resources it reduces stigma and drives awareness, serving the employees who need the support and fostering a culture of employee care, which benefits everyone."

~ Amy Marlow, MPH,
Head of Global Well-Being, MetLife

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