

looking after
your workforce

in 2021.



a Randstad report.

foreword.



The past year or so has taken its toll on us all. Many of us have been isolated, detached, concerned, scared, and lonely. We've survived loss, grief and in some cases, seriously ill health. And while many will be gearing up for the end of lockdown with a definite spring in their step, others are understandably concerned about what's to come.

Whether you've faced redundancy, furlough, remote working or business as usual, it's a time like no other. A time that needs solutions like no other.

The uncertainty surrounding livelihoods, health and career prospects has led to more people being diagnosed with mental illness than ever before. And unfortunately that's not something that's going to stop with the cessation of restrictions.

In the coming months, people are going to need an element of hand-holding; of reassurance; of understanding and empathy from their peers. As a business leader, that's yours to give. But you need to know what you're up against, and what steps you can take to ensure the wellbeing of your workers in the year ahead.

Failing to adequately support your people simply isn't an option: candidates are slowly regaining control of the jobs market, and they know what they want. This year so far has thrown into sharp focus the importance of workplace support, and the expectation of business leaders to make employee wellbeing a top priority.

In the report that follows, you'll find insight gleaned from 8,000 workers spanning every industry in the UK. The research, conducted in March 2021, uncovers some of the key concerns people have about returning to work, whilst offering actionable advice on how to create a culture of wellbeing in your workplace.

returning to work in a post-Covid world.

The workforce of 2021 has new expectations: namely, the continuation of flexible working.

With so many people able to work from the comfort of their homes over the past year, employees are acutely aware that there's very little business reason for them to be in the office (or designated place of work) five days a week; 52 weeks a year.

There will of course always be exceptions to this rule, but if employees can work from home without disrupting their day job, employers would be wise to afford a greater degree of flexibility and autonomy when the world returns to a semblance of normality.

For business leaders, keeping workers safe and happy should be a top priority in the months ahead, and making certain allowances will be key to this.

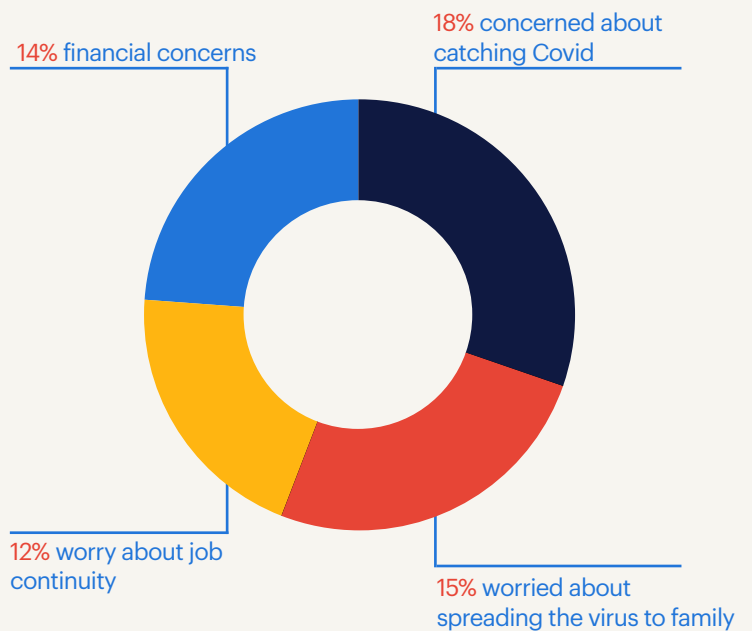
returning to work.

Getting into the rhythm of work after an unexpected absence can be tough.

Access helpful tips and hear from inspirational individuals who have turned their lives around and shared their experiences with Randstad. [Click here to view.](#)

But what are people most worried about?

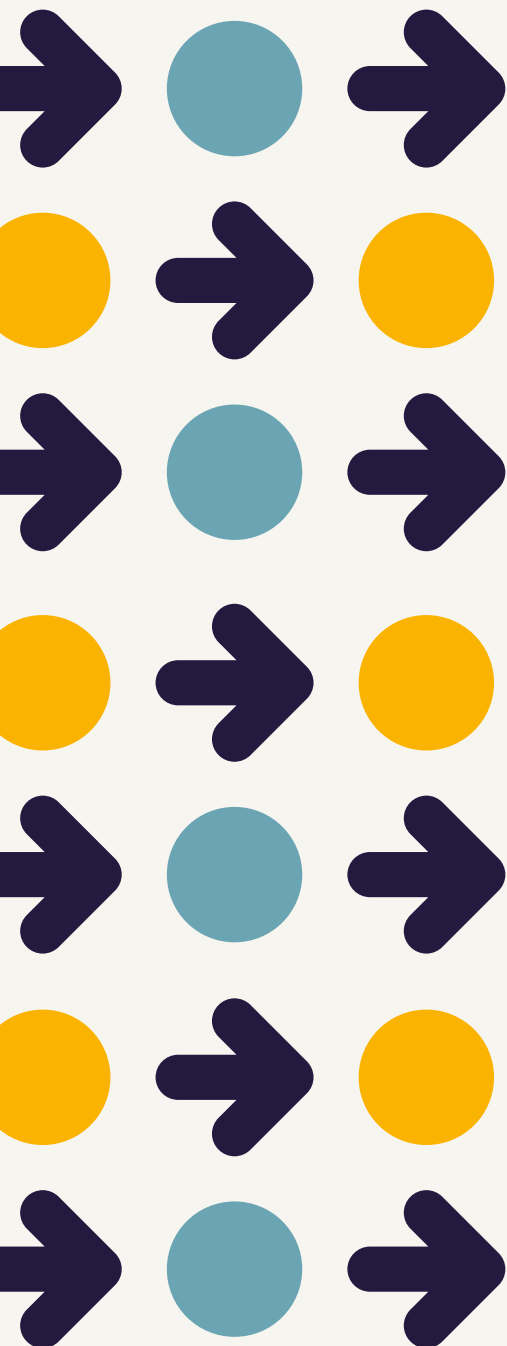
Our survey found that 18% of employees are concerned about catching Covid in the workplace, 15% are worried about spreading the virus to their family, and 12% worry about job continuity. There's also the 14% of people with financial concerns, and the 11% who are keen to rebuild working culture in the face of isolation.



It's clear that employees the country over are calling out for reassurance. They need to know that strict procedures are in place to protect their health; that their employer is still going strong, and not about to fold; that a sense of camaraderie and togetherness can be rebuilt following what has been a lonely year for many.



instilling confidence; rebuilding trust.



It's likely that even as we begin to emerge from lockdown, a large portion of the UK workforce will continue to work remotely at least some of the time.

Maintaining close contact with your employees is incredibly important when they're working from home or remote locations: regular check-ins help to engage, monitor and support your people, whilst reminding them that they're part of a wider team, with an employer who cares.

These avenues of communication ought to have been front of mind throughout the pandemic of course, but this wasn't always the case.

Our research found that almost 20% of employers neglected regular communication with their employees during lockdown – potentially exacerbating feelings of isolation and loneliness; feelings typically associated with poor mental health.

For those employers who didn't communicate with as much regularity as their workers may have expected, or needed, the onboarding process will be crucial.

reducing anxiety through better onboarding.

It will surprise few with a finger on the pulse of the current climate that **46% of people feel their mental wellbeing deteriorated** as a result of the pandemic. The past year has been one of great uncertainty, high stress, and oftentimes, low support.

An employee welfare audit carried out by Randstad found that 45% of furloughed workers are anxious about their return to work: those in Northern Ireland reported the highest levels of anxiety (50%) compared to those in the East of England (38%), while workers aged 18-25 were the most nervous (56%), in contrast to their older counterparts (11% of over 68s).

For employers then, how you reintroduce people to the workplace could be the difference between employees who thrive, and those who just about survive.

Good onboarding will play a significant part in managing anxiety, and lowering employee stress levels.



Only 32% of people who classed their onboarding process as 'good' or 'very good' felt anxious about their return to work; this is in sharp contrast to the anxiety felt by 61% of people who either had no onboarding, or who classified their onboarding experience as 'poor' or 'very poor'. Similarly, only 36% of those who enjoyed regular check-ins with their employer were concerned about their return to work, compared to 54% with bi-monthly check-ins, and 65% with no check-ins at all.

Victoria Short had this to say: "Normally the onboarding process would be reserved for introducing newly hired employees into an organisation. But these aren't normal times and workers who have been furloughed for a long time will benefit from some organisational socialisation to help them integrate back into the wider company."

catching covid a chief concern.

Over the past year we've been inundated with information about how to avoid catching Covid, so it's little wonder that so many of us are fearful of exactly that.

In fact, our survey found that 84% of UK workers have concerns about Covid in the workplace – a figure that rises to 87% for 26-35 year olds, and somewhat surprisingly, drops to 78% amongst the over 68s.

Worries around contracting the virus will of course be influencing how people feel about heading back to work once lockdown restrictions are at an end.

Our recent survey found that 78% of people want to return to the workplace, but 72% won't feel safe until those around them have been vaccinated. People need time to find their feet, and they need to understand what safety measures have been put in place to protect them.

One of the most important steps for employers to take in welcoming back their workers then is the roll-out of robust safety measures; this should include ensuring that everyone has time to get their vaccinations before placing pressure on people to leave their home-working set ups.



building resilience for better mental health.

When we asked our survey respondents what they need in order to improve their wellbeing, mental health and resilience training came out on top.

Following a year of lockdowns, restrictions and all-round uncertainty, the impact on mental health is clear: people are struggling, but they're also determined to do something about it.

A sizeable 60% of the people surveyed would like to see mental health and resilience training offered by their employers in a bid to boost their wellbeing. Stress reduction workshops weren't far behind at 54%, followed by workplace wellbeing champions (50%) and mindfulness training (48%).

The least popular option, at only 43%, was meditation sessions. Those in manufacturing, construction and property were the most averse to workplace meditation, at 62%, 60% and 59% respectively, while those in HR, banking and legal were the most likely to have access to workplace meditation already.



The pandemic has served to thrust mental health into the spotlight – particularly workplace mental health and employee wellbeing. Living and working in isolation, whilst also worrying about job security and personal and familial health has had an impact on us all.

Many people have experienced mental illness for the first time in their lives, and there's a thirst to do something about it. To take action. To step up and find ways to not only survive, but to thrive.

Workers across the country will be looking to their employers for a lead. The impact of the past year on our collective mental health simply cannot be ignored, and employers would do well to take these suggestions on board, and look to partner with professionals who can facilitate the mental health and resilience training that has been called for.

managing stress; reducing burnout.

As well as a rise in mental illness, our stress levels have taken a real hit.

Encouragingly, 29% of the people surveyed said their employer was doing more to help them manage stress levels than before the pandemic, while 26% enjoyed the same level of support as that offered in pre-pandemic times.

Still, there remains sizeable room for improvement: almost 47% of people said their employer did nothing to help with stress levels, with 10% receiving even less support than before the pandemic. This comes in spite of our employer survey, where 72% of employers agreed that their wellbeing strategy effectively covered their employees' needs. Some self-reflection here is crucial – as is taking the time to talk to your workers, asking the difficult questions, and actually listening to (and acting on) honest feedback.



Teachers were perhaps one of the hardest hit professions where stress was concerned, after a year of having to adapt to frequent changes in their working patterns. It doesn't come as a surprise that over 60% of education-based workers responded negatively when questioned about their wellbeing at work, while 47% reported high levels of stress.

On a positive note, 58% also said that their employers were supportive of them in helping to manage stress levels.

Few of us will have come through the pandemic unscathed (whether mentally or physically), but the support of an understanding employer – one who listens to employee concerns, and puts measures in place to facilitate recovery from stress and mental illness – will be instrumental as the UK workforce begins to find its feet.

rebuilding relationships in the workplace.

If we're ever to return to a semblance of normality, and a harmonious one at that, strong working relationships with our colleagues will be of paramount importance.

It's therefore concerning that our research uncovered a degree of ill-feeling amongst a portion of the UK workforce: some from those who continued to work while colleagues found themselves on furlough; others who resent the added pressure or lack of support from management.

Some of the responses we saw included:
"I'm doing their work whilst they're on furlough"

"I feel under pressure to work harder and be more productive, even if this means working silly hours and never having a holiday"

"my working hours have increased, with no support from management".

On the flip side, we also heard from those who relished the insight into a more human and personal side of their colleagues:

"We have deeper and more authentic relationships now we know the 'home' version of each other".



Employers have a lot of work to do. With a strong likelihood that many people will continue to work from home for at least some of the time, it's crucial that teams remain coherent. Emphasising the reason that some workers were furloughed and not others will be important (those on furlough may also feel resentful against colleagues who kept their jobs throughout), as will rebuilding trust in cases where managerial support seemed to be lacking.

Whether or not remote working continues, employers would do well to embrace the positive impact of seeing inside people's home lives; of connecting with people on a more personal basis. After all, we're not just workers: we're parents, partners, children and friends. We have interests and responsibilities outside of work, and it never hurts for our colleagues to be reminded of that.

re-building for the year(s) ahead.

Many of us are starting to see the light at the end of the Covid tunnel, but its repercussions will be felt for a long time to come.

Our mental and physical health has been affected; we've suffered losses, and upheaval; our careers have stalled, halted, or catapulted on the roll of a die; in actuality, life as we know it has been turned on its head. And it's a reality we're all trying to adapt to.

As we begin to emerge from the pandemic, the most successful business leaders will be those with employee welfare at the forefront of their minds. The employers who recognise that their people need time to heal, and to adapt. The team leaders who focus on rebuilding workplace relationships, without losing the lessons of the past year.

Despite the fear and isolation, we've had a taste of freedom and flexibility; one that few will want to lose in its entirety. Keeping your workforce happy and content then will call for certain allowances.

As we touched on at the beginning of this report, people have – in the main – exploded the myth that their jobs have to be performed from one centralised location. But they've also exploded another myth: that everyone wants to work from home, all of the time.



People miss people. More than they thought they would.

Most of us want the teamwork; the camaraderie; the collaboration. But we also want the understanding and empathy of an employer who recognises and respects our homelife. An employer who prioritises employee wellbeing, and who puts provisions into place to help cope with the pressures of modern working life.

The employees in our survey called for mental health and resilience training, for stress reduction sessions, and for workplace wellbeing champions who can lead the way when it comes to creating a culture that cares. They also demand safe working environments, stringent hygiene measures, and company-wide vaccinations to keep them, and their families, as far from Covid as a post-lockdown world will allow.

Because the workplace of 2021 doesn't just care about profits and public appearance; it cares about the people who make success happen. And it looks after them accordingly.