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Work Culture & Mental Wellbeing

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Dear Reader,

When we first embarked on evaluating how work culture impacts employee mental health and wellbeing we expected to see a moderate effect. For starters, we were probing 9 factors that already have a substantial literature behind them in the context of employee engagement, wellbeing, and stress. However, even with this prior knowledge, the magnitude of impact of work culture on employee mental wellbeing, and the aspects that dominate, has come as a tremendous surprise.

We've been conditioned to think that there is a separation between our work and life, implicit in the term work-life balance. This suggests that work is the transactional part of life, with the personal side at home and out with friends, separate from the workplace. Instead, what we find here is that our work life is every bit as personal as our home or family life. In other words, the relationships and meaning we find, or fail to find, at work are every bit as important to our mental wellbeing as our relationships at home.

Out of the 9 aspects of work culture that we looked at, relationships with your colleagues and feeling a sense of pride and purpose in your work came in at the top of the list in terms of impact to mental wellbeing, regardless of what type of job you do. A lack of good relationships and a poor sense of pride and purpose at work, even for those who were good at forming and navigating relationships, was associated with severe feelings of sadness or hopelessness, unwanted, strange thoughts, reduced energy levels and motivation, and even feelings of being detached from reality. Also impactful, but by half as much as these relational factors, were the traditional 'work-life balance' factors such as workload and the flexibility you have over your time. An excessive workload, after controlling for other work culture factors, was associated with worse sleep, diminished self-worth, poorer appetite regulation, more feelings of sadness and hopelessness, physical health issues and even confusion or slowed thinking.

Overall, low ratings for all 9 factors were associated with greater feelings of sadness and hopelessness to varying degrees. In addition, the impact of work culture on mental wellbeing was greater than the impacts of structural aspects such as working remotely vs in person or the type of work you did (although, on average, those working remotely fared worse than those working in person or hybrid, and those in customer service or physical labor jobs fared worse than any other type of work).

Altogether, what these findings indicate is that we are social creatures and that above all, in order to thrive, we need human connections and meaning in all aspects of our life, at home and at work.

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Summary

With the prevalence of mental distress on the rise around the world, especially in younger generations, mental health and wellbeing has increasingly become a topic of concern for employers. In order to become strategic about mitigating the risks, it is important for organizations to understand what is driving poor mental health and wellbeing in employees.

Using data from 54,831 employed, Internet-enabled respondents across 65 countries obtained in 2024, this study looks at multiple aspects of work culture and structure to determine how they relate to employee mental wellbeing which we define, and measure, as the ability to navigate life's challenges and function productively.

Here is what we find:

- 1.** Having poor relationships with colleagues and a low sense of pride and purpose in one's work are associated with the biggest decreases in overall mental wellbeing, on par with having challenges with family relationships.
- 2.** Those who rated these factors poorly are more likely to have feelings of sadness and hopelessness, unwanted, strange thoughts, reduced energy, decreased drive and motivation, physical health issues and a sense of being detached from reality, even after controlling for other factors.
- 3.** 'Work-life balance' factors such as workload and flexibility over time are also important but less so. Excess workload, for instance, results in poor sleep, diminished self-worth, worse appetite regulation and even increased nightmares, while flexibility over time had much smaller impacts on similar factors.
- 4.** Those working remotely fared worse, on average, than those working in person or hybrid. Similarly, those working alone fared worse, on average, than those in larger teams, and those in jobs involving customer service and physical labor fared worse than those in human care, knowledge work and business management jobs.
- 5.** The 9 aspects of work culture that we looked at had a several-fold greater impact on mental wellbeing than aspects of work structure, such as whether one worked remotely or in person, alone or in a team and the type of job.

Altogether, these findings demonstrate the profound impact of work culture on mental health and wellbeing, defined in terms of capacity for productive function, and suggest that companies serious about employee wellbeing should invest in fostering teams with strong relationships and a sense of purpose.

Introduction

With the prevalence of mental distress on the rise around the world, especially in younger generations, mental health and wellbeing has increasingly become a topic of concern for employers. As a result, workplace mental wellbeing programs such as mindfulness apps and therapy have increasingly gained traction across companies.

However, some studies suggest that they don't work. For example, a study of 32,974 employees at a large warehouse retail company in the United States found that while employees exposed to a workplace wellness program reported significantly more positive health behaviors, there were no significant effects on clinical measures of health, health care spending and utilization, or employment outcomes after 18 months¹. Similarly, a review of survey data from 46,336 workers across 233 organizations in the United Kingdom found employees who participated in a range of common individual-level wellbeing interventions, including resilience training, mindfulness and wellbeing apps were no better off across multiple indicators of subjective wellbeing².

To really tackle mental health in the workplace, we must therefore understand the root causes of the mental health challenges that employees experience. It is only then that organizations can become strategic about mitigating these challenges and understand what role, if any, they are playing in them.

“Only by understanding the root causes of the mental health challenges that employees experience can organizations become strategic about mitigating them and understand what role, if any, they may be playing to cause them.”

Measuring Mental Health & Wellbeing

Mental health and wellbeing is often conflated with happiness or simply mood. However, mental wellbeing goes far beyond this to encompass all of our mental capabilities - emotional, social, cognitive and physical - that together enable us to navigate life's challenges and function productively. We might think of this as the composite health of our mind. At Sapien Labs, the Global Mind Project measures mental health and wellbeing using an assessment called the Mind Health Quotient which measures 47 aspects of mental function that aggregate into an overall score (the MHQ)³⁻⁵. With these 47 aspects evaluated on a unique life impact scale, MHQ scores reflect the ability to function and are linearly related to productive days such that moving up or down 10 points from anywhere on the scale is roughly

equivalent to the same gain or loss of productive days⁵. Thus, the scores that we report are not simply readouts of mood but rather reflect the productive functioning of the population that we assess.

Mental health and wellbeing as measured by the MHQ



Root causes of mental wellbeing at work

We have uncovered numerous societal-level root causes of our mental health challenges from ultra-processed food to smartphone use in childhood to the deterioration of family bonds⁶⁻⁹. While companies can consider how they may promote or mitigate these aspects, here we ask specifically how work culture and structure influence mental wellbeing - aspects of the workplace where companies have a direct role to play.

We analyzed data, taken from the Global Mind Project, from 54,831 employed Internet-enabled adults across 65 countries who completed the MHQ assessment in 2024, in addition to answering questions on their work structure and culture and a host of other social and lifestyle factors. We ask about aspects of work structure including remote vs in-person arrangements to working in teams as well as the following 9 work culture factors that have previously been linked to mental wellbeing: Control & flexibility over time,

Control & flexibility over job, Workload, Learning & growth opportunities, Relationship with manager/supervisor, Relationships with colleagues, Feeling informed about what's going on, Being valued & recognized, and Feeling pride & purpose in work¹⁰⁻¹⁵.

For example, multiple large-scale meta-analyses and meta-reviews have found that factors such as effort-reward imbalance, high job demands, low decision latitude, bullying and lack of value and respect in the workplace have been associated with the various outcomes of psychological distress^{10,11,13}. However, studies particularly focusing on young people have also found a significant degree of uncertainty in terms of how different work factors impact mental health outcomes, suggesting there is still more to understand¹⁶. Here, we probe how these different work culture and structure factors impact mental wellbeing in 2024 and which of these matters the most.

Results

1. Work Structure

Here we look at the relationship between aspects of work structure and mental wellbeing, including whether a person’s work is fully in-person, fully remote or hybrid; whether they work on their own or in teams; and what type of work they do. We present three key results:

i. Work location

First, those who work fully remote, on average, had poorer mental wellbeing than those who work in-person (Figure 1a). However, those with a hybrid arrangement (a relatively small minority) had the highest mental wellbeing, slightly better, on average, than those who work in-person (with the exception of South Asia where fully in-person was better than hybrid).

Specifically, fully remote workers were more likely to have feelings of sadness or hopelessness, episodes of confusion or slowed thinking, unwanted strange or obsessive thoughts, and feelings of being detached from reality, compared to those who work in-person or hybrid.

ii. Working alone versus in teams

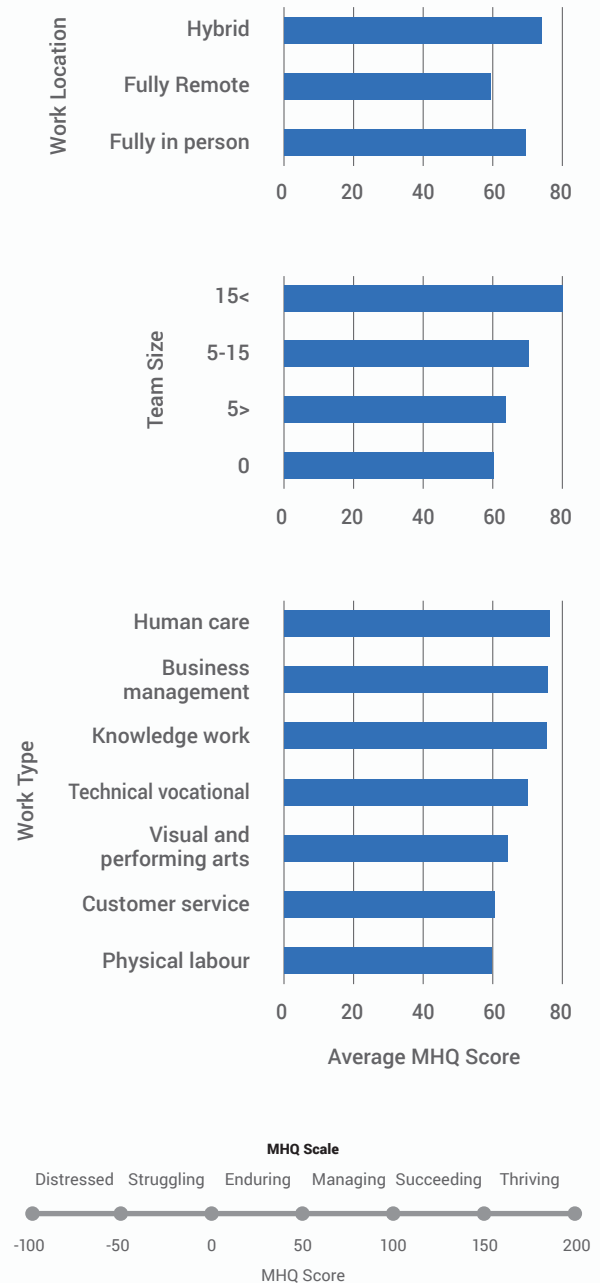
Second, those who work in teams had better mental wellbeing than those who work on their own, while those in larger teams of 15 or more fared better than those who work in smaller teams (Figure 1b). The improvements with team size were particularly prominent in Latin America and South Asia, whereas North America and Europe had less dramatic increases in mental wellbeing with increasing team size (see associated tables).

iii. Type of work

Third, those who work in human care (e.g. teachers, doctors), business management or knowledge jobs

Figure 1: Work Structure and Mental Wellbeing

(a) by location (b) by team size and (c) by work type



fare best while those who work in customer service jobs or in physical labor have the lowest mental wellbeing, followed by those who work in technical/vocational jobs or in the visual or performing arts (Figure 1c). Latin America has a different pattern relative to other regions with those in technical/vocational jobs faring among the best, and visual or performing arts the worst (see associated tables). The greatest variability across regions was for visual and performing arts.

2. Work Culture

The differences in mental wellbeing with respect to work structure are significant but pale in comparison to the differences with respect to work culture. Here we look at the relationship between mental wellbeing and aspects of work culture or how people experience their employment. Specifically, we look at 9 factors that were rated by participants on a 1-9 scale where 9 was the most positive and 1 the most negative.

Aspects of work culture queried:

- Control & flexibility over time
- Control & flexibility over job
- Workload
- Learning & growth opportunities
- Relationship with manager/supervisor
- Relationship with colleagues
- Being informed about what's going on
- Being valued & recognized
- Pride & purpose in work

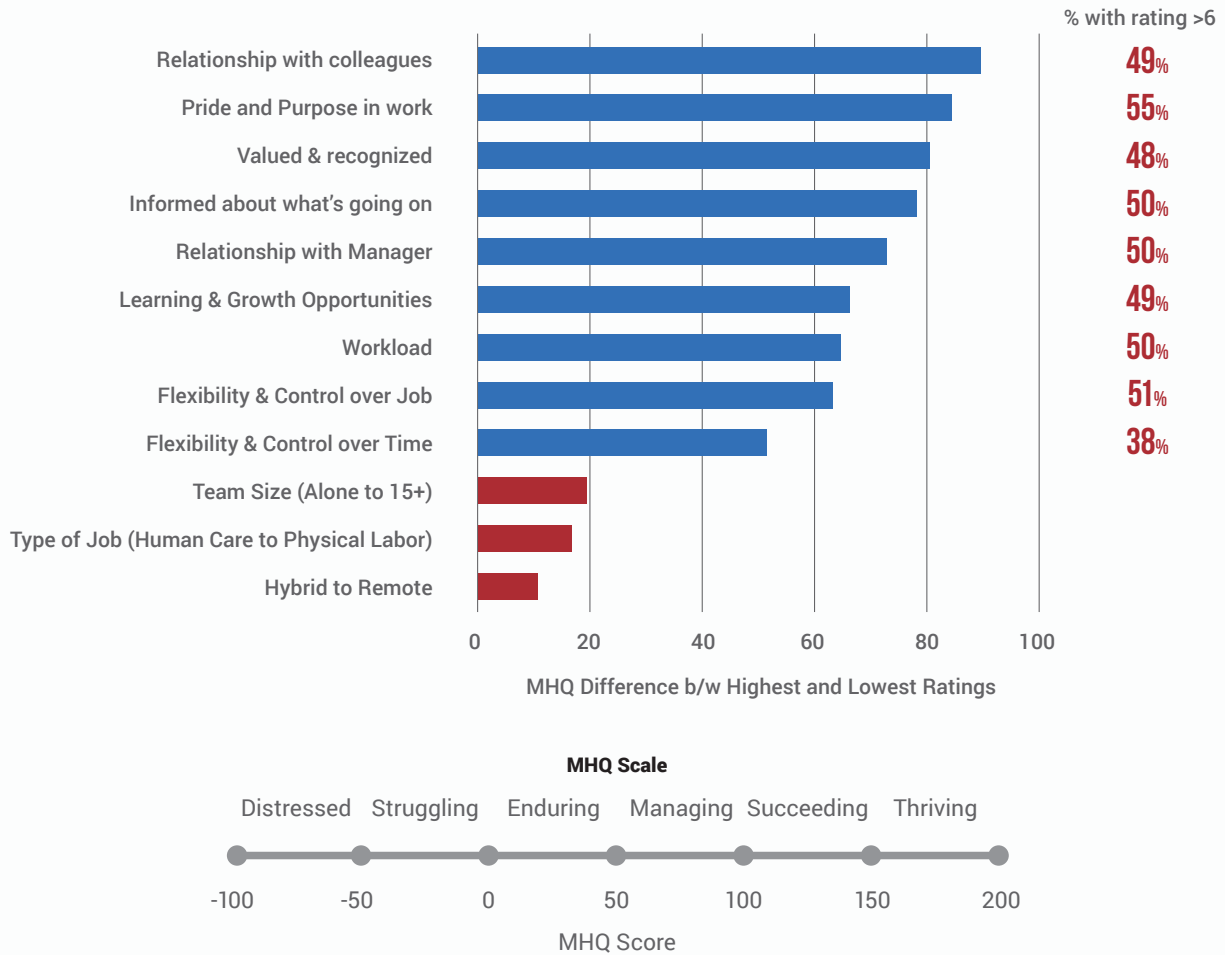
i. Work culture and mental wellbeing

All 9 work culture factors were significantly correlated with mental wellbeing. However, the 2 factors associated with the steepest gains in mental wellbeing were good relationships with work colleagues and a strong sense of pride and purpose in work (Figure 2). MHQ scores systematically increased by 90 and 85 points respectively as the ratings for these 2 factors went from 1 (worst possible rating) to 9 (best possible rating).

In contrast, MHQ scores increased by only 65 and 55 points respectively for the 'work-life balance' factors of workload and flexibility over time as ratings increased from 1 to 9. This aggregate trend, with respect to the top and bottom two aspects of work culture, was essentially the same regardless of the specific type of job, whether the person worked remotely, in person or hybrid, alone or in a large team, or whether they were younger or older (see associated tables).

Figure 2: Mental wellbeing by work culture

Impact on mental wellbeing was measured as the difference in MHQ score for each aspect of work culture between those who rated that aspect best (9) vs worst (1). Red percentages show the percentage who rated the factors in the upper third of the life impact scale (>6). Aspects of work structure from section 1 are shown in red for comparison.



Notably, all aspects of work culture had a much greater impact on mental wellbeing compared to any structural aspects such as the type of job, whether one worked remotely, in person or hybrid, alone or in a large team. Surprisingly, the magnitude of impact was equivalent to that seen when looking at the impact of poor family relationships on mental wellbeing⁸.

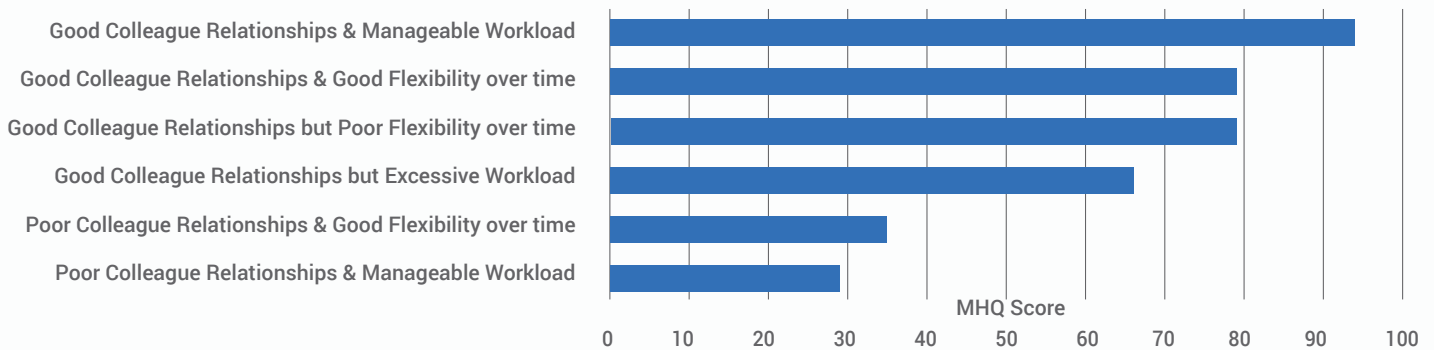
Finally, across the globe only about 50% of respondents rated colleague relationships as very good (7-9), while 55% rated pride and purpose as high. Conversely, 13% rated each of these very low (1-3). In contrast, only 38% rated flexibility over time high, while 26% rated it very low.

ii. Interactions between work culture factors

Having more flexibility over your time and a lower workload does not compensate for poor relationships with colleagues or a lack of pride and purpose in work. An almost equivalent difference persisted even for those who had the best ratings for flexibility over time and amount of work (see associated tables). Those who had poor ratings for workload and flexibility over time (ratings of 1-3) but high ratings of 7-9 for colleague relationships and pride and purpose in work had MHQ scores of 66 and 79, respectively (Figure 3) which was not very different from having good ratings on both.

In stark contrast, those who gave good ratings for workload and flexibility over time (ratings of 7-9) but poor ratings for colleague relationships (ratings of 1-3) had substantially lower MHQ scores of 35 and 29, respectively. Thus, work-life balance does not compensate for good relationships and pride and purpose at work. On the other hand, people are less impacted by higher workloads and lack of flexibility over time when they have good relationships with colleagues and feel pride and purpose in what they are doing.

Figure 3: Impact of different profiles of work culture, as measured by the average MHQ score



iii. Specific mental health symptoms associated with poor work culture

Here we report on the symptoms or capabilities that are most significantly impacted by each work culture or structure factor, when controlling for the other factors.

Those who report poor relationships with their colleagues (but rated other factors high) experienced more traumatic flashbacks, guilt and self-blame, unwanted, strange thoughts and feelings of sadness and hopelessness compared to those who had good relationships with their colleagues (Figure 4a). In addition, other aspects such as planning & organization and speech & language were also rated worse by those with poor colleague relationships.

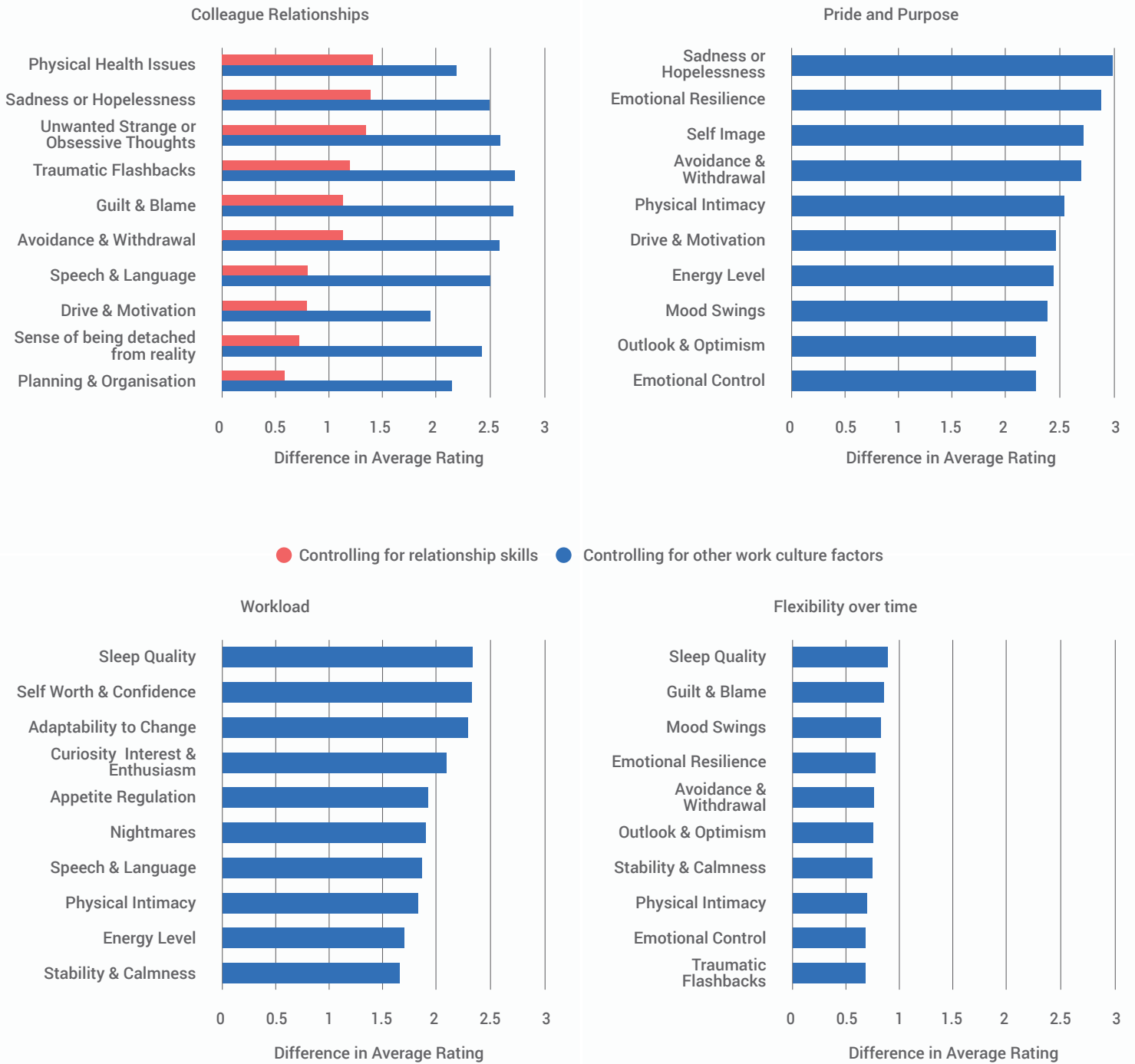
This suggests a reciprocal relationship between both work culture and the individuals' own capabilities with respect to relationships and work, where those who have better relational abilities and skills may experience their work culture more positively. We therefore controlled for relationship ability (red bars) and show that while differences in capabilities such as planning and organization were no longer as impactful, physical health issues, sadness and hopelessness and unwanted thoughts still dominated.

Those who do not feel pride and purpose in their work (but do well on other factors) also similarly had increased sadness and hopelessness but also report decreased emotional resilience and self-image as well as lower drive, motivation and energy (Figure 4b).

In contrast, excessive workload had a primary effect on sleep, leading to challenges with appetite regulation, nightmares and diminished stability and calmness (Figure 4c). Lack of flexibility over time had the least significant impact on its own with sleep quality also topping the list (Figure 4d).

Figure 4: Specific problems and capabilities associated with work culture factors

Individual problems and capabilities for (a) Relationships with colleagues, (b) Pride and purpose, (c) Workload, (d) Flexibility over time. Bars show the difference between the best and worst ratings (1 and 9) after controlling for other each of the other factors shown.



Insights and Interpretations

If there is one theme that emerges from this study, it is that we are social creatures and the more opportunity we have to work socially, and the better that social experience, the better we fare.

When we work in teams, when we have good relationships and camaraderie with these team members, when we feel pride and purpose in the work we are doing together and are valued by our co-workers, we are far more likely to thrive than when we work alone, don't interact in person with team members and have little sense of pride and purpose in what we are doing. Essentially, as humans, what we need to thrive is not leisure and convenience. Rather we seek meaning and connections with others and a sense of being valued in a human way, even if this means working more or working with less flexibility.

When we lack this, we are consumed by feelings of sadness and hopelessness, unwanted, strange thoughts, diminished drive and motivation and lower energy. All of this occupies our mindspace and diminishes our productivity and capacity for work.

“As humans, what we need to thrive is not leisure and convenience. Rather we seek meaning and connections with others and a sense of being valued in a human way, even if this means working more or working with less flexibility.”

A great deal of research has been done on the importance of our social relationships showing that those who thrive are those with strong families and strong friendships. For example, the Harvard Happiness Study, which investigates what makes a happy life, found that the one factor that ‘continuously demonstrates its broad and enduring importance’ is good relationships and that ‘people who are more connected to family, to friends, and to community, are happier and physically healthier than people who are less well connected’¹⁷. This is also borne out in studies from the Global Mind Project which show that family relationships, friendships, and the love and care we feel for our wider community are core drivers of our mental wellbeing^{8,9,18}. It is therefore not surprising that the importance of human relationships extends to work as well, especially since we spend the majority of our waking hours at work.

“If there is one clear directive that emerges from the data for organizations that are serious about the wellbeing and performance of their people, it's that they should focus on how to bring people together as effective teams with manageable workloads and clear sense of pride and purpose.”

If there is one clear directive that emerges from the data for organizations that are serious about the wellbeing and performance of their people, it's that they should focus on how to bring people together as effective teams with manageable workloads and clear sense of pride and purpose. Building relationships and strong and effective teams does not simply happen on its own but must be intentionally cultivated. Pride and purpose is a belief that needs to be reinforced at an individual, team and company level. Sports teams have long recognized the need for strong team relationships, pride and purpose, as well as the need for sufficient rest and recovery as a means of building the mental capacity for sustained high performance. It should not be a surprise that the same principles apply to work teams of all kinds.

The best part of being with the Warriors has been the team camaraderie, the team meals, the team pranks, the bond we share.

- Shaun Livingston

It is perhaps obvious that this cannot be accomplished through individual therapy or a few minutes of mindfulness a day. Rather it is important for employers to evaluate how their practices and policies from onboarding new employees, training of team leadership and even performance management systems shape their culture and experience of work. For employers this will have far reaching impact on performance from greater engagement and productivity to lower medical costs.

Methods

The Global Mind Project

The Global Mind Project acquires data from adults age 18+ from the literate Internet-enabled world through a comprehensive online self-report assessment called the MHQ³⁻⁵. Participants are recruited through advertising on Facebook and Google by separately targeting populations in each age-gender group and geography across 65+ countries in 14 languages across a broad range of interest criteria¹⁹. Individuals take the MHQ for the purpose of obtaining their mental wellbeing scores along with a detailed report offering self-help guidance.

Presently, 1000-2,000 people complete the assessment each day and are added to a dynamic database. In addition to the scored questions on mental feeling and function, respondents answer various demographic, lifestyle, and life experience questions.

The Global Mind Project is a public interest project that has ethics approval from the Health Media Lab Institutional Review Board (HML IRB), an independent IRB that provides assurance for the protection of human subjects in international social and behavioral research (OHRP Institutional Review Board #00001211, Federal Wide Assurance #00001102, IORG #0000850).

The Global Mind Project database is freely available to researchers in nonprofit and government organizations for non-commercial purpose. Access can be requested [here](#).

The MHQ

The MHQ is a unique comprehensive assessment of mental wellbeing comprised of 47 elements of mental feeling and function including both positive assets, as well as problems that span the symptoms of ten major disorders^{3,4}.

Within the MHQ, respondents rate each of these 47 items using a 9-point life impact scale reflecting the impact on one's ability to function. For items on a spectrum from positive to negative (spectrum items such as self-image) 1 on the 9-point scale refers to *Is a real challenge and impacts my ability to function*, 9 refers to *It is a real asset to my life and my performance* and 5 refers to *Sometimes I wish it was better, but it's ok*. For items with varying degrees of problem severity (problem items such as suicidal thoughts): the 1 rating on the 9-point scale refers to *Never causes me any problems*, the 9 rating refers to *Has a constant and severe impact on my ability to function*, and the 5 rating refers to *Sometimes causes me difficulties*

or distress but I can manage. Respondents rate these elements based on their current perception of themselves.

The MHQ score is an aggregate score of mental wellbeing calculated from these 47 elements, and positions individuals on the spectrum from Distressed to Thriving, spanning a possible range of scores from -100 to +200⁵. Negative scores indicate a mental wellbeing status that has significant negative impact on the ability to function (i.e. a status of distressed or struggling). It also provides sub-scores across 6 broad functional dimensions.

The MHQ is freely available online, is anonymous, and takes ~15 minutes to complete.

Data used in this report

Data used in this report included all responses obtained by the Global Mind Project between March and September 2024 (N=54,831; see associated tables for N values by age, gender and country) after the application of certain exclusion criteria described below. Only countries with sufficient samples size were included in the analysis. The final analyses included data from 40,282-43,687 respondents across 55 countries.

Data fields used in this report included 1) ratings to all 47 mental health questions 2) computed dimension scores and aggregate MHQ score and 3) responses to the following questions on workplace culture and structure:

Do you work as part of a team?

- Yes, in a team of less than 5 people
- Yes, in a team 5-15 people
- Yes, in a team of more than 15 people
- No, I work on my own

What are the primary features of your job?

- Physical/manual labour
- Technical/vocational
- Knowledge work
- Customer service
- Human care
- Business management/administration
- Visual and performing arts
- Other

What is your work situation?

Fully in person

Hybrid

Fully Remote

What is the size of your organization?

Less than 10 people

11-50

51-500

501 to 5000

Greater than 5000

How long have you been in your present job?

0-1 years

1-2 years

2-3 years

3-5 years

5-10 years

10+ years

Please rate how much control and flexibility you have over your time (e.g. to leave work to take care of a personal matter)

1 = I have no flexibility or control

5 = I have some flexibility and control

9 = I have full flexibility and control

Please rate how much control and flexibility you have over how you do your work

1 = I have no control over how I do my job; I just have to do as I'm told

5 = I have some control and flexibility over how I do my job

9 = I have a lot of control and flexibility to decide how I will do my job

Please rate how you feel about the amount of work you have to do

1 = I am given too much work that I can't get done in time

5 = I have to work hard and quickly, but it is manageable

9 = I can easily finish my work within the time expected

Please rate how you feel about the nature of your work

- 1 = It is meaningless and I hate it
- 5 = It has to get done so I do it
- 9 = I feel strong pride and purpose in it

Please rate how you feel about learning and growth opportunities at work

- 1 = I don't learn anything new and there is no growth
- 5 = Sometimes I learn new things
- 9 = I am always learning and growing

Please rate the nature of your social relationships with your work colleagues

- 1 = Overwhelmingly negative or adversarial
- 5 = Neutral or cordial
- 9 = Very positive, with strong friendships

Please rate the nature of your relationship with your manager or supervisor

- 1 = Overwhelmingly negative or adversarial
- 5 = Neutral or cordial
- 9 = Very positive, with strong support

Please rate how informed you feel about what is going on in your team

- 1 = I am the last person to find out anything
- 5 = I'm usually told about the important things but not much more
- 9 = I always have a good awareness of everything that's happening

Please rate how you perceive your work is valued and recognized

- 1 = No one notices or cares
- 5 = It is sometimes acknowledged
- 9 = It is valued and recognized

Data exclusion criteria

Respondents who stated that they did not find the MHQ easy to understand were excluded. This exclusion criterion was applied by removing respondents who answered No to the final question in the MHQ which asks them “Did you find this assessment easy to understand?”. Also excluded were those assessments completed in under 7 minutes (the minimum time needed to read and respond to the MHQ), and those where response ratings had a standard deviation of less than 0.2, indicating that the same rating value was selected across all 47 rating items.

Data analysis and statistics

Average MHQ scores, average dimensional scores, and average ratings for each of the 47 problems and mental functions assessed were computed for all respondents altogether and for each age-gender group separately and overall averages were constructed as weighted averages of age-gender prevalence. These mean values as well as standard deviations, N values and P-values for all comparisons are shown in the associated data tables.

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