



HEALTH AND WELL-BEING AT WORK



The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The not-for-profit organisation 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 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 Overall summary of findings

The findings of the CIPD's 2019 *Health and Well-Being at Work* survey, conducted in partnership with Simplyhealth, show that while most organisations engage in activities to improve employee well-being, they remain divided in how strategic and proactive they are. Overall, two-fifths have a standalone well-being strategy, while a similar proportion are much more reactive than proactive.

Positive findings show the average level of employee absence this year (5.9 days per employee per year) is the lowest rate ever recorded by this survey. 'Presenteeism' and 'leaveism' remain common, however, although we have seen a small decrease in the proportion observing leaveism in their organisation and more organisations are taking steps to discourage presenteeism.

Responses also point to an increased focus on mental health, which remains the most common cause of long-term absence and is a growing issue for nearly three-fifths of organisations. More are taking action to increase awareness of mental health and, while just a minority provide any sort of mental health training, the proportion doing so has increased compared with last year. Many organisations, however, still fall short in the attention mental health receives. Just half of respondents believe their organisation is effective at supporting staff with mental ill health or that it actively promotes good mental well-being.

Many organisations are also failing to provide line managers with the skills and support they require in this area. Line managers play a key role in managing absence and promoting well-being, but just half of respondents agree that their line managers have bought in to the importance of well-being. A minority believe their managers have the confidence and competence to support mental health.

Despite the positive trends in terms of absence levels and increased well-being activity, there remain clear divisions in the value organisations place on employee well-being and how strategic, targeted and comprehensive they are in their approach. Organisations that take a more proactive approach and conduct critical evaluation of their activity to ensure continuous improvement are considerably more likely to achieve positive organisational outcomes.

2 Public sector summary

This summary examines findings from the CIPD's 2019 *Health and Well-Being at Work* survey for a fuller understanding of the public sector's approach to managing employee well-being and absence, and the challenges it faces.

The public sector takes a strategic approach to well-being

Public sector organisations lead the way in recognising the importance of employee well-being. They are nearly twice as likely as the private sector to have a standalone well-being strategy in support of their wider organisation strategy (60% versus 32%) and are more likely to report that employee well-being is on senior leaders' agendas (70% versus 55% of the private sector).

Nevertheless, nearly two-fifths (38%) of respondents in the public sector report their organisation is much more reactive than proactive on employee well-being, while

this is a small increase compared with last year (2018: 33%), it remains better than in the private sector, where nearly half (48%) believe they are much more reactive than proactive.

Well-being activity is most likely to focus on mental health

As in the private sector, public sector organisations are more likely to report their health and well-being activity is designed to promote mental health (82% to a large or moderate extent) than any other aspect of health (physical health 73%, good work 68%, values/principles 63%, good lifestyle choices 62%, collective social relationships 59%, personal growth 57%, financial well-being 36%).

Mental ill health is particularly prevalent in the public sector. It is the main cause of long-term absence (followed by stress) and among the top causes of short-term absence. Moreover, nearly three-quarters of organisations in the public sector (72%) have experienced an increase in reported common mental health conditions over the past year, compared with just over half (53%) of private sector organisations. Further, nearly half (49%) of public sector respondents report an increase in stress-related absence, compared with a third (34%) in private sector organisations.

A minority take a strategic approach to financial well-being

In a similar picture to the private sector, financial well-being is a more neglected aspect of health and well-being activity and a minority of public sector organisations (13%) have a financial well-being strategy that takes into account the needs of different employee groups (15% in the private sector). Our findings show that over a quarter of respondents in the public sector (28%, compared with 22% in the private sector) believe that poor financial well-being is a significant cause of employee stress in their organisation, and just a fifth (21%) agree that their employees demonstrate the knowledge and skills to make the right reward and benefit choices to meet their financial needs.

The public sector is less active than private sector services organisations in regularly communicating reward policies to staff so they understand the benefits on offer and the choices available (41%, compared with 52% of private sector services). A minority of public sector organisations (14%, compared with 20% of private sector services) regularly consult employees to assess how well their existing benefit offering is meeting their financial needs.

Budgetary constraints often take precedence over managing identified health issues

Budgetary constraints tend to have greater influence on the purchase of well-being benefits in the public sector than managing identified health issues in the organisation, but this is also true in the private and non-profit sectors. Two-thirds (68%) of public sector organisations report that budgetary constraints are among the top three factors that influence decisions to purchase well-being benefits, while less than half (46%) report alignment with the organisation's health and well-being strategy is among the key factors and 42% managing identified health issues in the workforce.

Just under a quarter report no achievements from their health and well-being activity

As we've found in previous years, the public sector is more likely to offer employees a range of health promotion and employee support benefits (such as counselling services and employee assistance programmes) compared with the private sector. They are just as likely as private sector organisations, however, to report that they have not seen any positive outcomes from their activity (23%).

The most common achievements resulting from health and well-being activity over the last 12 months, again in line with the private sector, are better employee morale and engagement (49%) and a healthier and more inclusive culture (43%). Just over a third (35%) report lower sickness absence and 27% reduced workplace stress.

Organisations that evaluate well-being activity are more likely to report positive outcomes

Three-quarters of the public sector agree or strongly agree that impact evaluation is an important step in the development of their well-being programme, compared with two-thirds of the private sector.

Just two-fifths of public sector respondents report their organisation takes a continuous improvement/feedback loop approach to improve their programmes (39%) or evaluates the impact of their health and well-being programme by measuring employee health and well-being at least annually (40%). Fewer (23%) agree that their organisation critically assesses the quality of well-being outcomes for those involved. These findings are similar in the private sector.

Organisations that do take a more rigorous approach to evaluation, particularly those that take a continuous improvement/feedback loop approach to improving well-being programmes, are much more likely to report their activity has had positive outcomes compared with those that don't. This is also true of organisations in the private sector.

Little change in public sector absence levels

On average, public sector employees had 8.4 days of absence over the last year, compared with 4.4 days in private sector services, 5.6 days in manufacturing and production and 6.3 in the non-profit sector. While absence levels in the private services and non-profit sectors have shown a steady decline over the last decade (and this year are at their lowest levels recorded by our survey), there has been little change in public sector absence over the last few years, although it is lower than at the beginning of the decade (2010: 9.3 days).

The public sector uses a wide range of approaches to manage absence

Public sector organisations use a wider range of methods to manage absence compared with their counterparts in the private and non-profit sectors. They are more likely to use methods to review and deter absence (such as trigger mechanisms to review attendance and disciplinary procedures for unacceptable absence), to provide support to employees through employee assistance programmes, use risk assessments to aid return to work, involve occupational health and offer rehabilitation programmes.

They are also twice as likely as private sector organisations to report their organisation focuses on health and well-being (such as health promotion) to help manage sickness absence (public sector 59%, private sector 31%). Just under half of public sector organisations restrict sick pay for long-term absence (in line with the private sector), but they are less likely to do so for short-term absence (30% do so compared with just under half of the private sector). The public sector is also less likely than the private sector to offer private medical insurance.

Line managers play a key role in managing absence

Line managers in the public sector play a more prominent role in managing sickness absence compared with those in the private sector; for example, they have primary responsibility for managing short-term absence in four-fifths of organisations, compared with three-fifths of the private sector. Further, two-thirds of public sector respondents report line managers have primary responsibility for managing long-term absence (versus

31% in the private sector), although a case management approach is more common (78%). Three-quarters of public sector organisations provide line managers with training in absence-handling (compared with 52% of private sector organisations) and provide them with tailored support. Just over half agree that line managers have bought in to the importance of well-being (55%).

Most are taking steps to reduce stress but with mixed levels of effectiveness

The public sector and non-profits are more likely to be taking action to tackle stress than the private sector (public sector: 78%; non-profits: 77%; private sector: 66%).

The most common steps taken by the public sector to reduce and identify stress are flexible working options/improved work-life balance, risk assessments/stress audits and employee assistance programmes. Just under two-thirds (63%) of the public sector conduct staff surveys and/or focus groups to identify the causes of stress and 60% provide training aimed at building personal resilience. Just half (52%) provide training for line managers to manage stress. Despite their efforts, just two-fifths of those taking steps believe their organisation manages work-related stress effectively – a lower proportion than in the private sector, where half think their efforts are effective.

Increased openness about mental health

Half of public sector organisations have a policy that covers mental health, compared with nearly two-fifths of private sector organisations. A further 11% of public sector organisations are in the process of developing a policy compared with 23% in the private sector.

Most public sector organisations are taking action to manage mental health at work. As last year, the most common approaches include phased return to work and/or other reasonable adjustments, increasing awareness of mental health issues across the workforce, access to counselling services and employee assistance programmes. This year, an increasing minority are also providing mental health first aid training (39%, up from 28% in 2018) and mental health/well-being champions (34%, up from 28% in 2018). The proportion of respondents who agree that their organisation encourages openness about mental health has grown (2019: 70%, 2018: 59%).

Senior leaders and line managers need to promote and support mental health

Public sector organisations are more likely to report an increase in common mental health conditions compared with the private or non-profit sectors.

Overall, three-fifths of public sector respondents agree that their organisation actively promotes good mental well-being, while 56% agree it is effective at supporting people with mental ill health (compared with less than half in the private sector). Senior leaders and line managers may be hindering the effectiveness of organisational efforts. For example, less than a third of respondents in the public sector agree that senior leaders encourage a focus on mental health through their actions and behaviour (the same as the private sector), while just a fifth agree that managers are confident and competent to spot the early warning signs of mental ill health. Just 44% of public sector organisations train managers to support staff with mental ill health, although this is higher than in the private sector, where 38% provide training.

Most of the public sector experiences ‘presenteeism’ and ‘leaveism’, but just one in four are taking steps to discourage these practices

In a similar pattern to the private sector, the vast majority of public sector organisations (87%) have observed presenteeism (working when unwell) in their organisation over the past year; over a quarter (28%) report it has increased over this period. ‘Leaveism’ (using

leave inappropriately, such as working when on holiday or when unwell, or working in one's own time to get work done) is also commonplace. Three-fifths of the public sector report that employees work outside contracted hours to get work done, two-fifths that employees use allocated time off (for example holiday) when unwell and a third that employees use allocated time off (for example holiday) to work.

Presenteeism and leaveism can indicate high levels of anxiety and organisational issues (such as a long-hours culture or excessive workloads) that can affect employees' health and well-being as well as wider organisational performance. Nevertheless, just a minority are taking steps to discourage these practices. Less than a quarter (23%) of public sector respondents who have observed presenteeism report their organisation is taking steps to address it, an even lower proportion than in the private sector, where around a third are taking steps. Only slightly more of those who have observed leaveism (27%) in the public sector are taking steps to discourage it – the same proportion as in the private sector.

Line managers play a critical role in discouraging presenteeism and leaveism, but just 45% of the public sector provide managers with training or guidance to spot the warning signs of presenteeism and even fewer (35%) train managers to spot the warning signs of leaveism.

3 Looking forward

Public sector organisations are considerably more proactive than their private sector counterparts when it comes to promoting health and well-being (particularly mental health) and managing attendance. The effectiveness of their efforts varies, however. Moreover, while the private sector and non-profit sectors have seen a considerable decline in their average levels of absence, the public sector has only experienced a very small decrease, although we recognise that headline absence rates are just one aspect to help assess whether or not a workplace and its people are healthy. Mental health issues and stress are particularly widespread in the public sector.

Our findings suggest that many organisations would benefit from taking a more targeted approach to well-being that identifies and addresses the underlying threats to well-being and ensures that well-being initiatives are achieving results through evaluating outcomes and taking a continuous improvement approach.

HR has a crucial role to play in driving the well-being agenda forward through increasing organisational awareness of the value of a healthy workforce and developing a more co-ordinated and integrated approach. Policies and practices need to be clearly communicated and understood, embedded in the culture and consistently applied throughout the organisation. The commitment of senior leaders and managers to health and well-being is a key prerequisite for the success of any organisational programme. Senior- and manager-level commitment is also essential for addressing some of the main causes (such as heavy workloads) of unhealthy trends, such as workplace stress, presenteeism and leaveism. Organisations need to ensure that managers are equipped with the skills, confidence and support they require to facilitate a healthy working environment, pre-empt risks to well-being, ensure effective and timely interventions and aid an effective return to work.



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