A guide to improving mental health in the workplace

Build a stronger, more resilient workforce

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When employers look out for their employees' mental health, everyone benefits.

Employee health and happiness is vital to a company's success. Employees who have emotional support and practical tools for improving their mental health aren't just more engaged at work; they're also more resilient and adaptable.

Employers, executives, and HR leaders have the power to change the conversation around mental health and lay the groundwork for greater well-being—they just need the right tools to do it.

That's why we've created this comprehensive guide to creating change at the organizational level. Whether you want tips for getting started or fresh ideas for expanding upon your company's current well-being strategies, this guide can help you take a more thoughtful, proactive approach to strengthening employee mental health.

60%
say they don't receive enough emotional support from their supervisors

56%
say their employers don't provide a safe environment for those with mental illnesses

Employees are the engines that keep companies running—but they're rapidly losing fuel.

Globally, nearly half of employees say they regularly experience stress during a large portion of the day, in addition to other negative emotions like worry, anger, and sadness.[1] And 83% of employees feel emotionally drained from their work.[2] There are two key factors contributing to this phenomenon: sustained stress and lack of support.

83%
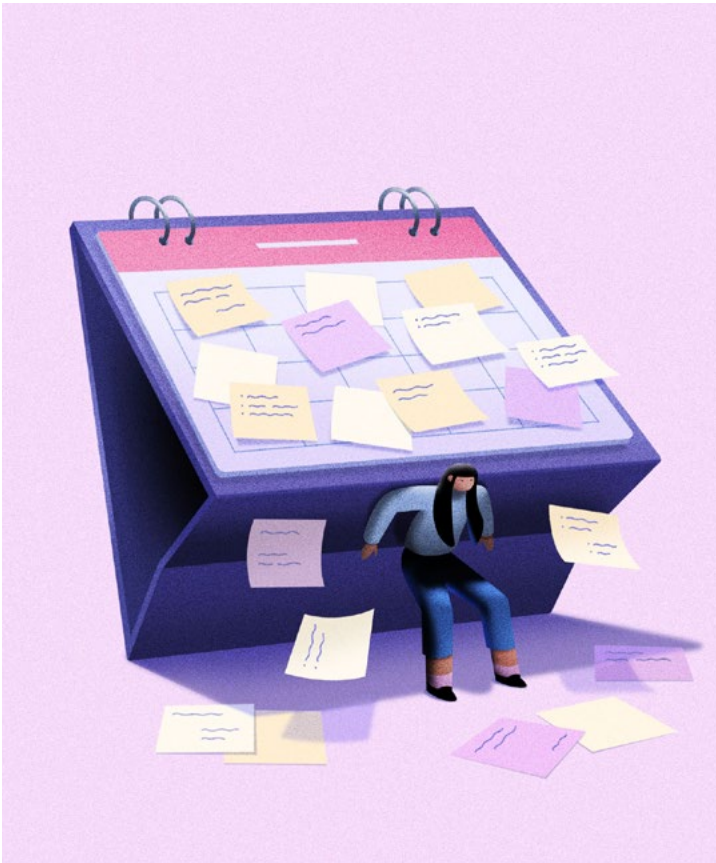
of employees feel emotionally drained from their work

Sustained stress

Nonstop stress in the workplace is the foundation for a host of employee mental health issues. Countless factors contribute to stress in the workplace, including: heavy workloads, long working hours, intense pressure, poor communication with managers, inflexible company policies, financial worries, and difficult interpersonal relationship dynamics.

Lack of support

Employees need practical resources to manage their stress and steady emotional support. Effective support comes in many forms, from a company's policies on paid time off (PTO) to the way managers communicate with employees. Unfortunately, nearly 60% of employees say they don't receive enough emotional support from their supervisors, and 56% say their employers don't provide a safe environment for employees who live with mental illnesses.[3]

When employees are overworked and under-supported, they're more susceptible to anxiety, depression, and burnout.

Organizational change leads to individual improvement

Companies play an integral role in supporting their employees' mental health. And for employees, support isn't just a nice bonus—it's expected. More than 80% of employees say their employers have a responsibility to their health and well-being.[4]

So, where should employers start?

In order to offer comprehensive, personalized solutions for bolstering mental health in the workplace, companies need to make changes at an organizational level.

That means reevaluating benefits packages, rethinking team communication, and overhauling systems and policies that contribute to poor employee health and lower job satisfaction.

Developing a strategy for navigating mental health challenges, however, isn't enough; companies also need to proactively make changes that uplift employees and help prevent mental health issues. Understanding employee needs is a good first step. Along with better compensation, the majority of employees want three things: a healthier work-life balance, more flexibility, and an increased focus on well-being at work.[5]

>80%

More than 80% say their employers are responsible for their well-being

There are *five critical areas* employers can focus on to improve mental health in the workplace:

Culture

Workload

Communication

Growth

Flexibility

Culture

Resetting cultural attitudes and expectations

Workplace culture has a monumental effect on employee mental health. It's tempting to pin culture down to company hangouts and office perks, but that's only a surface-level picture. In actuality, workplace culture is the core of a company, influencing everything from customer service policies and hiring practices to internal communication patterns and benefits packages

What is workplace culture? **Workplace culture is the unique collection of values, beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes the people in a particular workplace share.** Culture tends to be a top-down model, with executives and leadership shaping cultural ideas and building the structural systems that reinforce them.

Individual employees experience the advantages and disadvantages of their workplace's culture every day, whether or not they're conscious of it. After all, culture doesn't just play a role in employee schedules, workloads, and work-life balance; it also influences how coworkers speak to one another and how managers deliver feedback and assign responsibilities. Simply put, workplace culture has an enormous influence on how employees fare physically, mentally, and emotionally at work.

At the company level, a positive workplace culture can help promote collaboration, foster independence and initiative, and improve retention. At the individual level, a healthy culture can raise job satisfaction and reduce stress.

46%

more likely to be productive

30%

less likely to be stressed

When employees work in an open, supportive environment, they're 46% more likely to be productive and 30% less likely to be stressed.[6]

Positive workplace cultures are compassionate, energizing, flexible, and supportive. Employees tend to have more manageable workloads, more autonomy over their schedules, and healthier separations between their work and personal lives.

Negative workplace cultures, on the other hand, can be competitive, rigid, stressful, boring, and toxic. These types of cultures tend to create overworked, unhappy employees, in turn leading to decreased productivity, lower company morale, and high turnover.

Workplace culture is an amalgamation of different rules, systems, and styles, but there are three core building blocks that influence it: values, benefits, and communication.

Values

A company's values set the tone for how leaders and employees think, speak, collaborate, innovate, and act at work. Values can refer to the qualities or ideas a company wants to embody, like transparency or fearlessness, or the specific issues and causes a company wants to support, like racial justice or cancer research awareness. Values also help inform a company's mission statement.

Companies that share and live out their values tend to have stronger workplace cultures than companies that don't. Purpose-driven companies—organizations that stand for something bigger than their product or service—are particularly effective at shaping positive workplace culture. In fact, companies that lead with purpose have more satisfied employees and report 40% higher levels of retention than their competitors.[7]
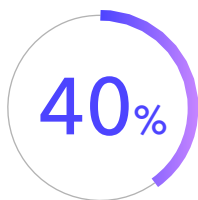
40% higher levels of retention

Benefits

A company's employee benefits are another important pillar of workplace culture. Eighty percent of employers agree that workplace benefits contribute to creating a stronger work culture, and 61% of employees say having access to more benefits would decrease their stress.

That's because comprehensive, thoughtful benefits don't just give employees greater financial security—they also help employees feel supported and protected. Beyond a competitive salary and employee recognition, a benefits package is the number three driver of overall well-being for employees.[10]

In addition to health insurance, PTO, and disability and leave coverage, employees want benefits that support their physical and mental fitness. Seventy percent say they're interested in wellness programs that would encourage and reward healthy behavior.[11] Think: virtual fitness subscriptions, mindfulness-based mental health apps, nutrition plans, and mental health counseling.

Communication

How your company communicates internally plays a big role in shaping workplace culture. In the workplace, communication is a fluid entity that encompasses a wide variety of conversations and correspondences, including company-led announcements and news, team meetings, one-on-one check-ins, and coworker-to-coworker chats.

Fostering a culture of open, compassionate communication can help employees feel heard and supported. In fact, workplaces where employees are encouraged to share their concerns with supervisors have higher overall workplace health scores.[12]

61%

would be less stressed if they had access to more benefits

Case study

Shifting culture by prioritizing mental health

Creating a workplace culture that values mental health is crucial to improving employees' well-being. To do that, employers need to destigmatize mental health and offer more mental health resources.

The first step to de-stigmatization is increasing awareness. When companies openly discuss mental health as part of overall health, employees may be more likely to share their struggles and ask for support.

DELOITTE   Professional services network **Deloitte** understands the value of discussing mental health at work.[13] They started a company podcast to help break down mental health stigmas and share tips for improving well-being at work. The company also offers benefits designed to support employees mentally, emotionally, physically, and financially. In addition to a host of well-being resources, they give their employees expanded paid family leave and regular well-being subsidies.[14]

The takeaway
When employers prioritize mental health awareness and resources in the workplace, employees have more tools and support to succeed.

Transforming workplace culture for greater total health

Cultivating a stronger, more supportive workplace culture is critical to improving employees' mental health. Here are six steps to making positive changes:

Assess your culture

The first step to changing workplace culture for the better is evaluating it honestly. Remember: Remember: workplace culture starts with the shared beliefs and values established by leaders, so you need to consider your company's leadership style, mission statement, communication policies, and commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). It's also a good idea to analyze your company's turnover rate, employee satisfaction scores, and benefits packages to see what's working and what isn't.

Define your company values

Take the time to review and refine your company values. Think about which values the company upholds well, and which ones the company falls short on. Do the values accurately reflect your company brand, the products and services you sell, and the causes you want to support? If not, it's time to make some changes.

Solicit employee ideas
After gathering your executive team to discuss potential improvements, consider crowdsourcing your employees' opinions, too. You can send a survey to ask employees what they appreciate about the company and which words they feel embody the company's ethos.

Break down the behaviors behind the values
Once you've clarified your company values, work on explaining what each particular value looks like in action. If one of the values is compassion, for example, your company might give employees three paid days a year for volunteer work, donate 5% of monthly sales to a nonprofit organization, or emphasize the importance of speaking kindly to coworkers and customers at all times.

**Share the value system across the company**
Don't forget to communicate your value system to employees. When employees understand their company values—and see management, HR, and executives leading by example—that's when cultural change begins.

Encourage empathetic communication and policies

Demonstrating empathy through open communication and compassionate work policies goes a long way in supporting employees' mental health. The following strategies can help:

Educate leaders
Enroll your managers and executives in a course that hones their listening skills and teaches compassionate communication.
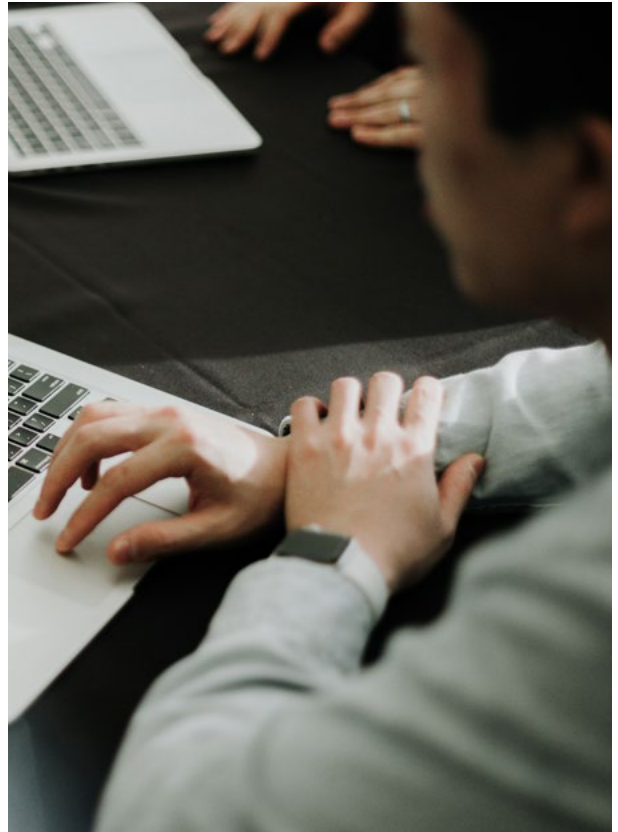
Provide feedback
Feedback shows employees they're seen and valued. In addition to teaching managers how to share constructive criticism, encourage them to give praise and express gratitude when people do positive work, whether it's excelling at a presentation or helping train a teammate.

Review internal policies
Instead of looking at your company's policies in terms of function and finances, try viewing them through a lens of empathy. How would your policies shift if you could better accommodate employees' needs and concerns? Depending on what employees want, that might mean increasing PTO or offering more flexible working hours.

Commit to diversity, equity, and inclusion

To create a culture that adequately supports employee mental health, it's vital that your company commits to DEI work.

Every employee—regardless of race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, or gender identity—should feel valued and respected in their workplace. Creating a nurturing and welcoming work environment for everyone takes intention, consistency, and time, but there are a few smart ways to get started:

Enlist external help
Bring in an outside expert to assess your company's DEI efforts, and help pinpoint areas for improvement.

Evaluate your pay structure for transparency and equity
Take a critical eye to your company's compensation plan to make sure salaries are equitable, competitive, and consistent.

Encourage the formation of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)
ERGs help create a more inclusive workplace by involving employees in company-wide policies.

Pay attention to details
Update company language, employee guidebooks, and workplace signage to be more inclusive of all gender identities, family structures, abilities, and backgrounds.

Build mental health awareness and resources into your culture

Here are a few ways your company can be more open about mental health care:

Educate employees
Eliminating the stigma around mental health starts with raising awareness. Enroll employees in a training course to learn about mental health facts and stress management techniques.

Start a dialogue
Encourage managers and leaders to initiate and facilitate conversations about mental health during team meetings or one-on-one check-ins.

Expand company offerings
Consider offering benefits like paid mental health days, on-demand therapy, mental wellness platforms, paid bereavement leave, and stipends for mental health counseling or coaching.
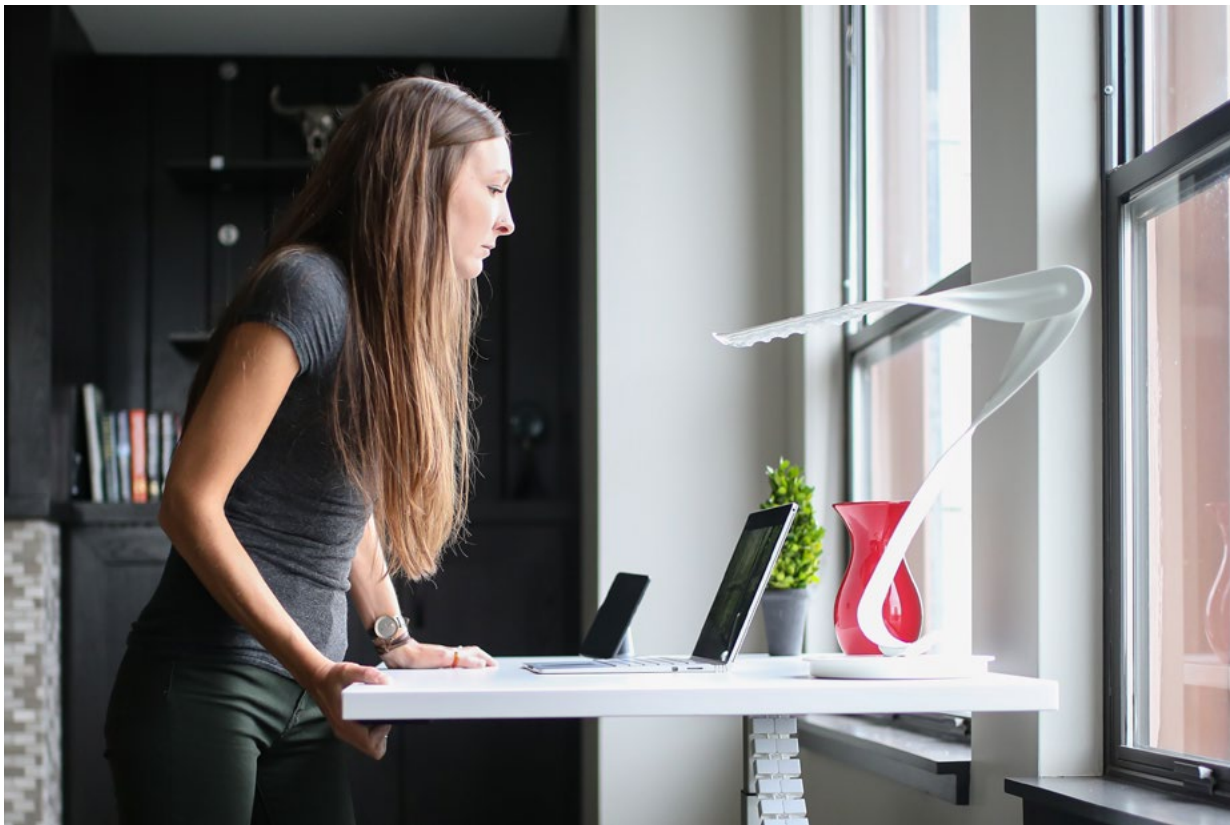
Adapt as the world evolves

The best way to ensure a positive workplace culture is to adapt to your employees' changing needs. Employees from different generations, backgrounds, and geographic locations all have unique concerns and priorities. Some employees may need time off to care for sick family members, for example, while others might need emotional and practical support in the wake of a natural disaster.

In addition to regularly surveying employees about their needs, make sure you're continually brainstorming new offerings and ways to help.
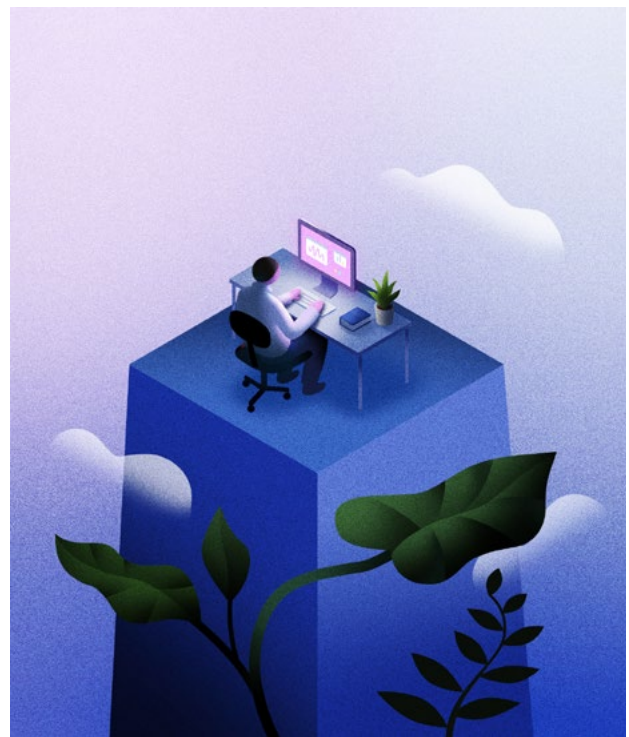
Workload

Rethinking employee workloads

Workload and well-being are directly related. Today, thanks in part to productivity-obsessed work cultures and blurred lines between home and work, employees are working longer hours than ever before. Nine percent of total global employees are working 55 hours or more a week.[15]

Of course, occasional periods of intense work are normal, but when employees are regularly overworked, their health can suffer. In fact, increased work demands is the second most common reason for employees' general decline in well-being.[16]

9% of employees work >55 hours per week

Combine heightened work demands with high managerial expectations and limited flexibility, and employees can run into major problems. Workload affects four essential areas of employee health:

Mental health

Overworked employees are more likely to deal with mental fatigue, exhaustion, and stress. Seventy-six percent of employees agree that workplace stress affects their mental health, and can lead to depression or anxiety,[17] and 46% of employees say being overworked is a key contributor to burnout.[18]

Physical health

When employees work long hours, they may not sleep as much, nor do they have as much time or energy to exercise or prepare healthy meals. Partly because of that, overworked employees are at a greater risk for heart problems and stroke. Compared to people who work 35 to 40 hours a week, people who work 55 or more hours a week have a 35% higher risk of stroke and a 17% higher risk of dying from ischemic heart disease.[19]

76%

say workplace stress affects their mental health

46%

say being overworked contributes to burnout

35%
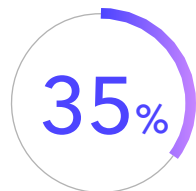
higher risk of having stroke

17%
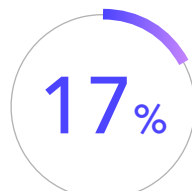
higher risk of dying from heart disease

Social health
When employees have too much work on their plates, they may not have enough time for family commitments, social activities, or alone time.

Emotional health
Overworked employees might feel less valued and more scrutinized than their peers. This could lead to decreased productivity at work, lower self-esteem, and poor job performance.

The answer to preventing burnout and improving mental health is simple: reduce employee workloads. A reasonable workload is the number one mitigator of stress and burnout, and the number three mitigator of depression.[20]

To reduce the workload, companies need to evaluate two main factors: company policies and leadership. Eighty-seven percent of employees would like to work for a company that sets boundaries on their working hours.[21] Companies that enforce rigid work hours, expect overtime, and offer little flexibility can contribute to burnout. To help employees maintain a reasonable workload, employers can offer more flexible work schedules and discourage working after hours.

The second factor is leadership. One in three managers say they're not always aware of how much work their team has.[22] When team leaders or supervisors don't understand their employees' workflows or know their schedules, they may inadvertently assign too much work. That's why it's important for leaders to closely monitor team and employee workloads, then take time to set clear and reasonable expectations for working.

Case study

Implementing a four-day work week to reduce burnout

There are countless ways to reduce an employee's workload. You can distribute tasks more widely, streamline workflows, limit the number of accounts or projects an employee can take on, reduce work hours, or even restructure the typical work day.

BUFFER

That's what social media software company **Buffer** decided to do. When their employees were burnt out and exhausted from pandemic-related stresses, **Buffer** decided to experiment with a four-day work week. They wanted to give their employees more time to navigate the complexities of life amidst mandatory lockdowns and school shutdowns.

Buffer's initial one-month trial quickly turned into a six-month trial, at which point the company took stock of what they accomplished and how their employees felt about the change. The result was "sustained productivity levels and a greater work-life balance." Nearly 34% of their team felt more productive than during the traditional five-day work week, while 60% felt as productive as before.

They also saw significant increases in output across teams, lower reported stress levels from employees, and consistent work happiness levels, despite their employees living through an uncertain, volatile year. Due to the success of the experiment, the Buffer team has decided to keep a reduced workload for the foreseeable future. They're continuing to measure engagement, output, performance, and general job satisfaction, and making changes as needed.[23]

34%

felt more productive during 4-day work week

The takeaway
Making thoughtful, measured changes to employee workloads can reduce stress and improve overall well-being.

Modifying Employee Workloads
For More Mental Stability

There's no one-size-fits-all solution to managing work volume, but re-examining company-wide expectations and re-distributing workloads can result in happier, healthier employees. Follow these three steps to modify the workload:

Pinpoint the problems and patterns that lead to higher workloads

Before you can create organizational change, you need to determine what's wrong with the current workload at your company. That requires talking with employees, taking a closer look at internal systems and processes, assessing organizational goals, and reevaluating company ideas around efficiency and productivity. Consider the following actions:

Survey employees
Understanding how employees feel about their workloads is vital to correcting problems.

Meet with executives
Hold one-on-one meetings with leadership to discuss company goals and benchmarks.

Analyze company data
Reviewing numbers around job performance, output, project timelines, and employee satisfaction can give you more insight into employee effectiveness and efficiency.

Review internal systems
Observe a handful of different projects from start to finish. Assess the various stages of the workflow to see where employees run into problems because of slow approval times, gaps in oversight, clunky software, or other obstacles.

Understand group needs
Meet with individual team or department leaders to discuss their employees' responsibilities, goals, strengths, and weaknesses. Understanding what different groups need in order to do an effective job is crucial to better supporting the individuals that make up each group.

Enact organizational changes

Rethinking employee workloads requires making organizational changes. Here are some to consider:

Define the average workflow
Help executives and team leaders create transparent workflows, so individual employees have a better understanding of what's expected of them.

Streamline approvals
Work with management to streamline approval processes, so employees can work more efficiently.

Increase positive feedback and acknowledgment across teams
Hold a seminar for management about the importance of delivering regular, thoughtful feedback. Remind them that encouraging and validating employees can incentivize them to work more efficiently, while offering constructive feedback can help employees increase output and improve job performance.

Offer more flexibility
Advocate for flexible work policies that give employees more ways to balance their workloads. Depending on your company's structure and industry, you could offer customizable work hours or give employees the option to telecommute a couple of times a week.

Encourage check-ins
Help management see the value of checking in with employees to assess their workloads and offer support where necessary.

Discourage multitasking
Giving employees too many responsibilities or tasks at once can detract from their focus and result in workload overwhelm. That's why company leaders should work on setting an example of single-tasking. To do that, you may need to minimize meetings, assign less busywork, or streamline company communications.
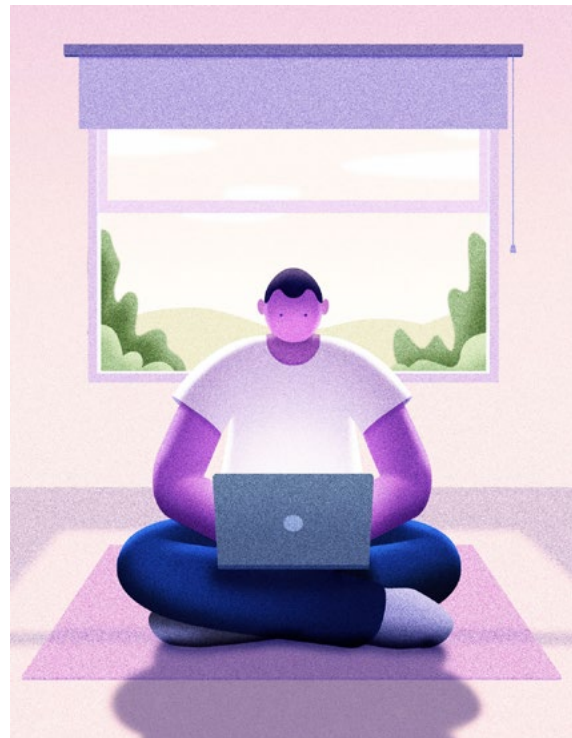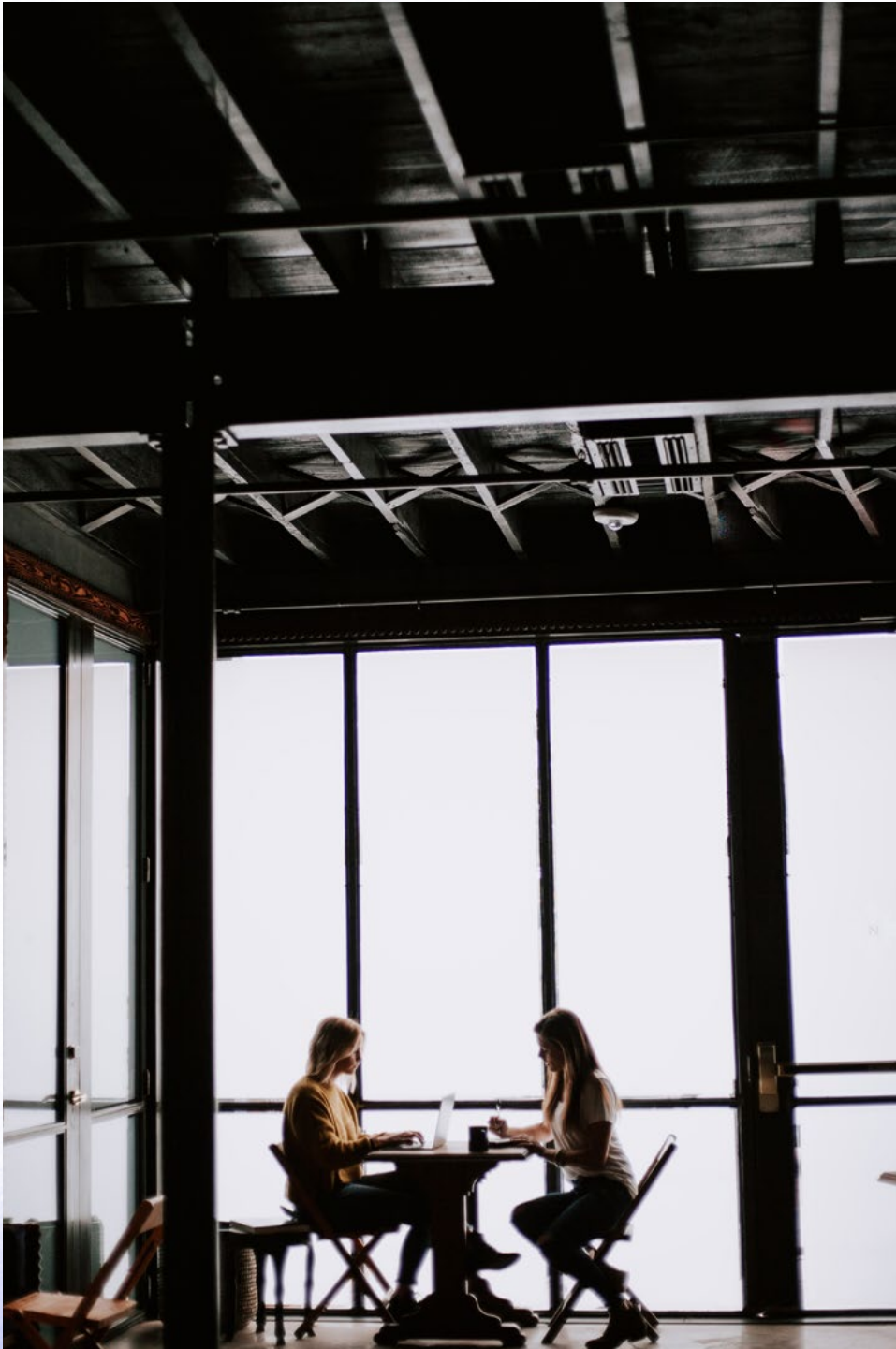
Enlist more support

A surefire way to reduce workloads and prevent burnout is to offer employees more emotional support and practical assistance.

Here's how you can do that:

Re-allocate resources
Consider hiring additional full-time employees to balance employee workloads, or look for opportunities to outsource tasks or bring on contractors.

Train leaders on effective work distribution and expectation setting
Teach company leaders how to prioritize projects, set accurate expectations, delegate tasks to maximize efficiency, and assign work more fairly.

Bolster HR support
Brainstorm new ways to emotionally and logistically support employees who are feeling overwhelmed or approaching burnout. You could send out a "Guide to Navigating Burnout," so employees understand the signs to watch for; implement an open-door policy so employees feel safe turning to HR for help; or solicit ideas and feedback from employees.

Adopt new technology
Research workplace tools designed to help facilitate communication and streamline workflows. Certain types of software can automate tedious manual processes, freeing up employees to focus on customer interaction or deep work.

Provide time management resources
Consider distributing a pamphlet of time management tips, or giving employees the option to use time tracking software so they can better understand when they work best and which tasks take the longest.

Communication

Setting new standards for workplace communication

Workplace communication lays the foundation for employee satisfaction and well-being. Poor communication can hinder employee happiness, while effective communication can amplify it. Of course, communication isn't just about the exchange of ideas and information—it's also about fostering an open, nurturing environment where employees feel safe and supported.

When employees are satisfied with their workplace communications, they're 177% more likely to be holistically well, 156% more likely to feel valued and appreciated, 48% more likely to be resilient, and 38% more likely to feel productive.[24]

177% more likely to be holistically well

156% more likely to feel valued and appreciated

48% more likely to be resilient

38% more likely to feel productive
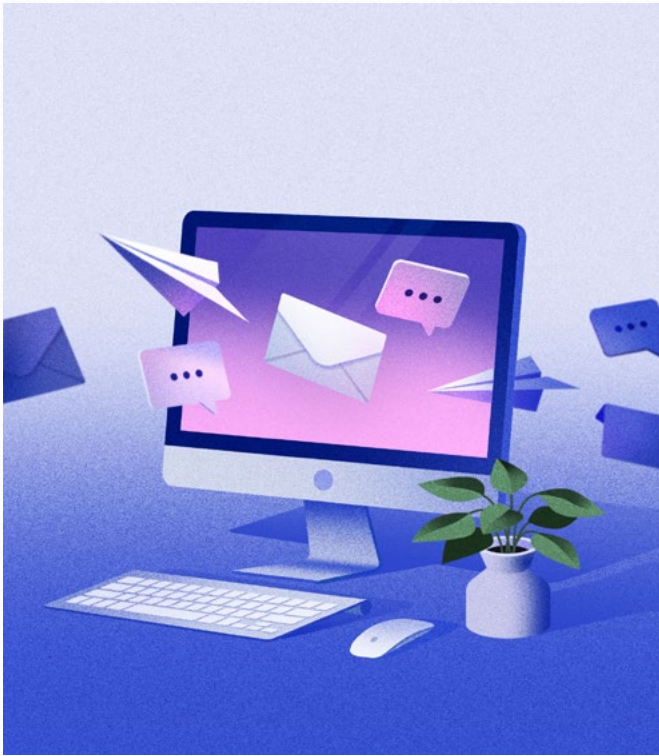
Positive, effective workplace communication has the following qualities in common:

- Compassionate, inclusive language
- Transparency
- Predictability
- Clearly defined rules and guidelines
- Open-door policies
- A friendly, approachable tone

On the opposite end of the spectrum, poor workplace communication tends to have the following qualities in common:

- Exclusive language
- Ambiguous rules and guidelines
- Sporadic frequency
- Conflicting ideas and tones
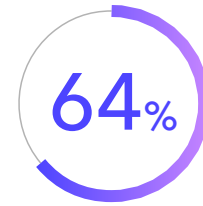- Dismissive or callous responses

Six facets to improve workplace communication:

1. **Openness:** The range of different subjects discussed in the workplace

2. **Tone:** The attitude employees and leaders adopt when speaking to one another

3. **Clarity:** How clear and easily understandable workplace communication is

4. **Frequency:** How often managers, leaders, and coworkers communicate

5. **Inclusivity:** How welcoming and inclusive company language and employee correspondences are

6. **Consistency:** How steady and predictable workplace communication is

Each of these elements affects employee well-being in a different way.

Openness

Companies need to create space beyond professional and work-related discussions to talk about issues that affect employee well-being. Unfortunately, mental health is a taboo subject in many companies, to the point that 64% of employees worry that reaching out to HR about a mental health issue would threaten their job security.[25]

The stigma around mental health starts with HR and executives: 75% of HR leaders and 82% of CEOs believe that their companies view employees with mental health conditions as weak or burdensome.[26]
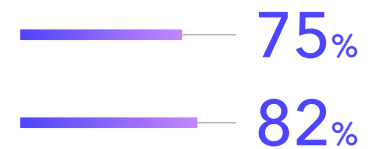
When employees are afraid to talk about their mental health in the workplace, they may be less inclined to ask for help. This lack of communication can trigger a vicious cycle. Without adequate emotional support, employees' mental health can suffer. And when employees are struggling, their workloads might become unmanageable, causing them to feel more stressed and overwhelmed. Operating under extreme stress for too long can then lead to issues like burnout and depression.

64%

believe reaching out to HR about mental health will risk their job

75%

82%

75% of HR leaders and 82% of CEOs believe that their companies view employees with mental health conditions as weak.

9 in 10

employees believe an open-door policy is important for mental health
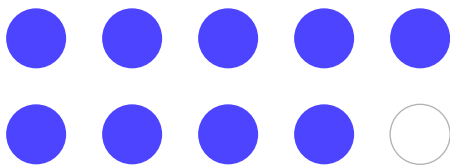
An open line of communication, however, can help. Nine in 10 employees believe having an open-door policy with HR and management is an important factor in addressing mental health.[27]

Tone

The way leaders and employees speak to one another in the workplace can either breed familiarity and cultivate trust, or cause tension and hurt feelings. Tone takes a different form at every company. Some companies prefer to communicate in a playful, casual way, while others emphasize professionalism and precision. Regardless of your company's unique style of communication, infusing empathy and kindness into your tone can help employees feel comfortable speaking out about their mental health.

Clarity

Encouraging clear and transparent communication in the workplace can minimize confusion, reduce mistakes, and boost employee confidence. Executives, HR staff, and team leaders should use clear, accessible language to set expectations, define roles, and share company rules and policies.

Frequency

The frequency of a company's top-down and peer-to-peer communication depends on the industry and workplace culture, but over and under-communicating both have negative consequences.

Over-communicating—either via lengthy meetings or unnecessary emails—can overwhelm and distract employees, while under-communicating can result in employees not feeling valued in the workplace or confident in their responsibilities. As a result, they may experience additional worry or stress. Forty-seven percent of employees say they experience anxiety about the future when their employers don't communicate effectively. And individuals who feel anxious about the lack of communication are nearly three times more likely to experience burnout.[28]

That's why it's important to find the sweet spot for communication frequency. Depending on employee needs and preferences, that could mean establishing weekly team meetings, cutting down on communication channels, or increasing one-on-one check-ins.

Inclusivity

It doesn't matter how courteous your company's tone is or how often managers check in with employees—if you don't lead with inclusiveness in your communications, employees won't feel supported or cared for. Unfortunately, there's a gap in understanding when it comes to inclusivity. Ninety-six percent of CEOs and HR leaders believe their organizations are inclusive of everyone, compared to just 80% of employees.[29]

96%

96% of CEOs and HR leaders believe they are inclusive

whereas

80%

Only 80% of employees think so

Inclusive communication means using language that welcomes everyone regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, race, or ability, as well as eliminating language that stereotypes, generalizes, invalidates, or discriminates. But that's just one layer of inclusive communication. Employers should also implement strong DEI policies to support employees who are disproportionately affected by issues in and beyond the workplace, like racism, sexism, or homophobia.

Consistency

When workplace communication is sporadic or conflicting, employees might feel less stable and confident at work. Maintaining consistency—in terms of content, tone, clarity, frequency, and inclusivity—gives employees a better idea of what to expect and how to conduct themselves at work.

Case study

*Using open, empathetic communication
to support employees*

Open, empathetic workplace communication isn't just about what
you say—it's about *when* and *how* you say it. Companies that excel
in compassionate communication take care to listen, reassure
employees, advocate for their needs, and proactively offer help.

KLOOK   That's what Singapore-based company **Klook** did for General
Manager Sarah Wan.[30] After two years of nonstop work on top of
dealing with pandemic-related stresses, Wan was mentally and
emotionally exhausted. She was quickly approaching a state of
burnout—and her manager took notice.

However, rather than ignore the problem or reprimand her for
exhibiting some negativity at work, Wan's manager encouraged
her to take time off and fully disconnect from work. Instead of
checking work emails and answering questions like she usually
did while on leave, Wan was able to completely detach with the
support of her manager. Not only did he ban Wan from working,
he gave her teammates strict orders not to contact her for
work-related matters while she was away. After two weeks, Wan
returned to work feeling rested and recharged.

The takeaway
Opening the lines of
communication between
managers and employees
makes it easier to tackle
potential mental health
problems before they get
out of hand.

Refining workplace communication for greater calm

Improving your company's communication style and policies is a major part of supporting employee mental health. Here are three steps you can take:

Create an internal communications plan

An internal communications plan acts as a roadmap for executives and team leaders. Plus, taking the time to articulate your company's communication style and goals helps you consider what works and what doesn't. Try the following strategies:

Determine your communication ideal
Using the six tenets of communication as a guide, help executives set goals for workplace communication. Next, develop strategies for reaching the goals and clarify how you'll measure progress. For example, if you want to increase the frequency of communication between managers and employees, you could implement managerial training and establish monthly one-on-ones. To measure progress, you could assess employee satisfaction scores and job performance.

Evaluate channel effectiveness
There are hundreds of different ways to communicate in a workplace, but not all of them are effective. To figure out which platforms you want to eliminate or embrace, consider the various types of communication within your company—from company-wide email newsletters to team Slack channels—and think about how much value they add.

Establish a meeting policy
Meetings can be great tools for facilitating communication, but they can also be tedious and time-consuming. Consider what will allow your company to achieve its goals, while still respecting employees' time and work preferences. You may need to establish meeting-free blocks of time, for example, or nix company meetings in favor of smaller team gatherings.

Give employees opportunities to share feedback
Communication is a two-way street, so it's important to give employees and managers the opportunity to share their ideas and offer feedback. You could create an anonymous suggestion box, send out monthly surveys, or hold HR office hours for employees.

Initiate discussions on mental health
Lead by example and start a company-wide discussion on mental health. This could take the form of a training seminar, fun event, or paid mental health conference day.

Incorporate DEI work
Make sure you're evaluating your internal communications plan for inclusivity and equity.

Embrace communication training

Communication isn't always intuitive, especially when it comes to learning how to communicate with empathy. That's why it's crucial to educate and train company leaders and employees on effective communication. Here are some way to do that:

Send surveys
Start by sending out anonymous email surveys that ask employees what their communication concerns and needs are. This can help you identify areas to cover in training.

Develop a training course
Make it mandatory for employees and leaders to take a training course on basic workplace communication. In the course, explain the benefits of healthy communication, show examples of the type of communication you want to emulate, and give employees and leaders actionable tips for speaking candidly and listening empathetically.

Encourage regular feedback and recognition
Eighty-two percent of employees say they're happier at work when they're recognized.[31] To give employees the acknowledgment they need, develop a guide for managers and leaders that explains how to deliver both positive and negative feedback.

Implement DEI training
Communication improves across all departments when employees understand how to navigate DEI issues with sensitivity and compassion.

Encourage personal connections

Communication in the workplace shouldn't just extend to workplace matters. Positive interpersonal communication can play a role in employee happiness at work. Here are some ways you can encourage personal connections:

Celebrate employees
Along with celebrating employees for work-related achievements, it's important to congratulate employees for major life milestones, like getting married, having children, or obtaining a degree or certification.

Offer sympathy and support
Take time to express condolences when employees deal with loss, and to offer support and resources when they're going through difficult times.

Facilitate interpersonal interaction
Set up non-work-related events and activities where employees can get to know one another and connect without work pressures. If your company is fully remote, you could host a virtual concert, create a book or movie club, or break employees into discussion groups based on hobbies.
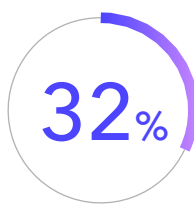
Growth

Expanding opportunities for employee growth

Personal growth—the process of improving your capabilities and potential—is a crucial component of employee mental health. To prosper physically, mentally, and emotionally, employees need to feel satisfied in the workplace and fulfilled in their personal lives.

20%

just 20%
are engaged

32%

only 32%
are thriving

Unfortunately, just 20% of employees say they're engaged at work and only 32% say they're thriving in life.[32]

One of the missing ingredients might be personal enrichment. When employees participate in activities—in *and* out of the workplace—that are intellectually challenging, creatively stimulating, and meaningful, their overall well-being has the potential to improve.

Rather than leaving employees to chart their own personal growth trajectory, companies can get involved. There are two ways employers can play an active role in employee growth:
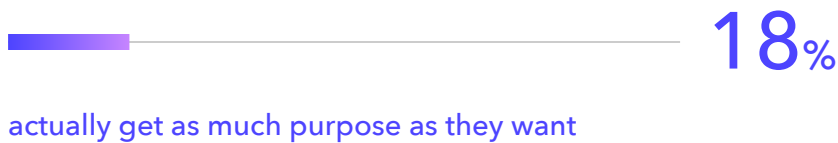
1. Encourage employees' professional development

2. Support employees in personal growth

Professional development

The correlation between work fulfillment and general happiness is high. Employees who feel like they're living out their purpose through work aren't just more connected, engaged, and excited in the workplace; they also have better health, higher levels of overall satisfaction, and more energy and resilience.[33] The problem, however, is that although 70% of employees say their sense of purpose is defined by work, only 18% of employees actually get as much purpose as they want.[34]

70%

say their sense of purpose is defined by work

whereas

18%

actually get as much purpose as they want

That's why focusing on professional development is impactful. Employees can get a sense of purpose from meaningful work, job mastery, strong work relationships, and external validation—and professional development affects all of those areas.

Professional development also helps employees become more satisfied, capable workers by nurturing their existing talents and giving them the opportunity to expand their skill sets. Along the way, employees can gain confidence and develop a deeper understanding of their strengths and interests. As a result, they may be more motivated, productive, and adaptable at work.

Personal growth

Employees need to feel like they have purpose at work *and* beyond. Purpose outside the workplace can come from relationships, hobbies, volunteer activities, and creative endeavors. When companies support employees in their personal growth, they're more likely to invest in interests and activities outside work; and when employees find meaning and joy outside work, they tend to feel healthier and more balanced.

Here's what employer support for personal growth can look like:

- Setting work boundaries so employees have more distinct separations between their work and personal lives
- Giving employees time to invest in personal hobbies and pursue non work-related goals
- Giving employees more control over their work schedules
- Facilitating the study of life skills outside of work

Case study
*Bolstering mental health by
providing growth opportunities*

Every company—regardless of industry, business model, or size—can commit to facilitating employee growth. Companies that provide opportunities to stretch their employees personally and professionally often have higher retention levels and employee satisfaction scores. Here are two examples:

Digital content and application company **Adobe** knows their focus on employee growth keeps employees engaged and happy.

ADOBE   Over the years, **Adobe** has dedicated time and attention to building out their development programs for employees at every level—from entry-level positions to senior leaders. They offer a suite of virtual learning programs with courses on career management, inclusion, and leadership. They also have a learning fund program that gives employees $10,000 a year in for higher education tuition or certification programs, as well as a $1,000 annual stipend for short-term learning opportunities like attending conferences and buying reading material.

That's not all, though. **Adobe** also helps employees network with their coworkers, and arranges opportunities for pro bono work so employees can gain experience in different roles. Their dedication to employee development has had tangible results: they have a 90% average customer satisfaction score across their development programs and high employee engagement scores.[35]

90%   adobe has a 90% average
customer satisfaction score

Mexican restaurant chain **Chipotle** is committed to fostering employee growth for over 60,000 employees worldwide. To follow through on their mission to "Cultivate a Better World," **Chipotle** has created a series of growth programs for employees.

In addition to developing training paths for every type of employee to advance and hone their skills, the company also offers debt-free degrees and tuition reimbursements so employees can continue their education outside work. Giving employees different avenues to accelerate their careers and deepen their personal skills has resulted in better retention rates and happier employees.[36]

The takeaway
Offering employee growth opportunities at work and beyond is key to helping employees become the best versions of themselves.

Embracing employee growth for stronger enrichment

Rethinking your company's approach to employee growth takes time, intention, and capital, but it's a worthwhile investment in employees' mental health. Consider the following strategies:

Create a growth plan for employees at work

Helping employees navigate their careers and gain new professional skills can go a long way toward improving their experience in the workplace. As you work with executives to build a thoughtful, customizable employee growth plan, here are some ideas to consider:

Tailor your offerings
Send out a survey asking employees what types of professional development offerings or activities they're interested in. If you don't want to leave the survey open-ended, make suggestions for employees to rank in order of preference.

Establish mentor/mentee programs
Create mentor programs that connect employees from different levels or departments, so they can guide, teach, and support one another in workplace growth.

Offer training for soft skills
Soft skills like problem solving, communication, and public speaking can help employees build confidence and leadership abilities.

Provide technical training
In addition to training employees when they're hired, work with executives to offer training for technical skills like coding, copywriting, graphic design, IT, or machinery maintenance. Honing their technical skills can help employees pursue a promotion, advance in their field, or switch to a different role.

Host Lunch and Learn events
Lunch and Learns are a great way to educate employees on a topic related to work or career development.

Think: negotiation, management, or presenting.

Offer reimbursements for learning activities
Sixty-five percent of employees say they want professional development reimbursements from their companies.[37] Consider giving employees annual stipends for books, online classes, conferences, or educational apps.

Facilitate networking opportunities:
Create events where employees can meet with one another and network, or set up opportunities for employees to shadow coworkers in different roles or departments.

Support continuing education
You can encourage employees to pursue educational opportunities that advance their skills at work by offering stipends for certifications or school.

Communicate growth opportunities
Use weekly email newsletters, company meetings, and manager check-ins to remind employees about the opportunities available to them and explain how they can take advantage of them.

Encourage personal growth outside work

Successful companies emphasize personal growth just as much as professional development. Here are a few strategies to assist employees in their growth outside the workplace:

Get personal
Encourage supervisors and managers to hold regular one-on-one meetings with employees to check in and find out what they need for their personal growth, whether it's financial help to pursue a degree or time off to spend with their families.

Offer stipends for educational pursuits
Consider offering tuition stipends for employees who want to obtain a degree or certification in a non work-related field.

Provide life skill training
Help employees grow by offering training for general life skills, like personal money management or technology use.

Demonstrate flexibility
If you can't give employees financial assistance beyond their compensation, consider giving them more flexibility or autonomy in their work hours. An employee may want to rearrange their work schedule to take a filmmaking class, train for a triathlon, or volunteer at their child's school.

Support employees' vast interests
Show your support for employees' outside interests by encouraging workplace book clubs, sports teams, and other non work-related groups or activities.

Encourage volunteer days
Consider giving every employee a paid volunteer day to engage in meaningful work outside of the workplace.

Share physical and mental health tools and resources
Helping employees become the best versions of themselves requires a holistic investment in their health. Consider offering resources to help employees to prioritize their physical and mental health.

Think: workplace gyms, onsite mental health counseling, or stipends for online exercises classes and healthy meal kit services.
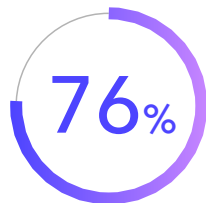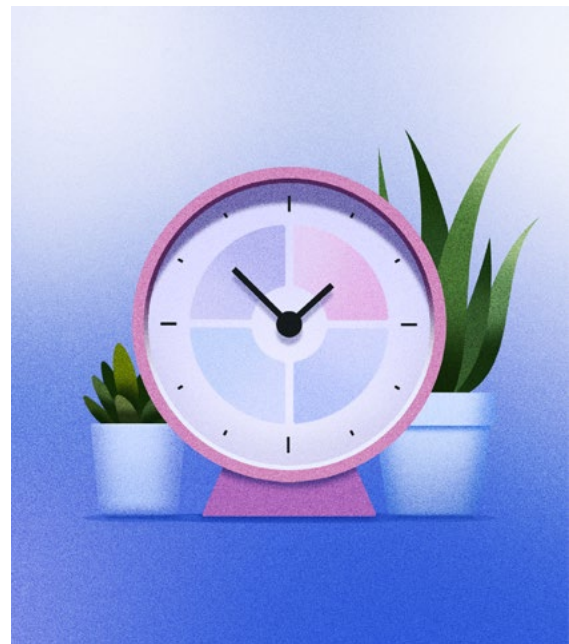
Flexibility

Redefining flexibility in the workplace

One of the most impactful ways to support employee mental health is to offer more flexibility in the workplace. As telecommuting and remote work gain popularity across a variety of industries, flexibility has become increasingly important to workers of all types. Today, 76% of employees say they're interested in alternative work arrangements that provide greater flexibility.[38]

76% say they're interested in flexible work arrangements

Offering more flexibility at work can help boost employee engagement and productivity, but the most consequential benefit is greater employee well-being. A flexible work arrangement is one of the top mitigators of employee stress, burnout, *and* depression.[39]

That's because flexibility gives employees:

- More autonomy over their schedules
- More time for appointments and errands
- More freedom to pursue hobbies and make social plans
- More time for family
- The ability to work when or where they're most productive
- Greater work-life balance
- Less commute stress

Nine in 10 employees and CEOs say flexible work hours are an important factor in addressing mental health,[40] but despite the general consensus, there's a disconnect in application. Only 28% of employees feel their employers offer enough flexibility in hours and arrangements, whereas 81% of employers believe they offer adequate flexibility.[41]

28%

Employees feel their employers offer enough flexibility

whereas

81%

Employers believe they offer adequate flexibility

To close the gap in flexibility options, companies need to rethink their approach to **how, when, where,** *and* **how often** employees work.

How employees work

Adjusting employee job duties, team workflows, and internal processes can create more day-to-day flexibility for employees. Companies that rely on daily meetings, for example, could consider reducing meeting times or giving employees the option to opt out of certain gatherings to get ahead on work. Employers who require their employees to run major decisions by a manager could work on streamlining communication or giving employees more power over certain areas of their work.

Of course, not every company has the option to restructure how employees do their jobs, but making a few thoughtful shifts can have a big impact.

When employees work

Expanding the options for when employees work is a good way to maximize flexibility. Some employers need their employees to be available during specific times of the day to interact with clients and customers, but not every company needs to maintain strict working hours for employees. Thirty-five percent of employees say a flexible approach to working hours is key to improving work-life balance.[42]

35%

say flexible hours is key to work-life balance

A flexible approach looks different for every company. Some companies operate with an open work day, letting their employees work during whatever time of day is most convenient for them. Other companies might give their employees more say in choosing their shifts or creating their schedules.

Where employees work

Giving employees the freedom to choose between working onsite, working at home, or working in a co-working space is a great way to provide flexibility. The environment where employees work has a major influence on how happy, comfortable, and productive employees feel doing their jobs.

Of course, not every company can be flexible about their employees' work location, but employees who work primarily behind a computer are eager for additional options. Sixty-five percent of employees would like the option to work remotely full-time, while 31% would appreciate a hybrid work model with some days onsite and others at home.[43]

65%

would like the option to work remotely full-time

while

31%

would appreciate a hybrid work model
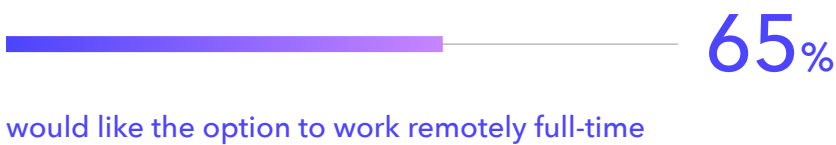
How often employees work

Employees who want more time to invest in their personal lives are calling the traditional 40-hour work week into question. Companies across all industries can reevaluate their standard employee work hours, and consider whether or not they have the resources and freedom to make adjustments.

To accommodate employees who want more time away from work, employers can consider cutting work hours, offering additional vacation days, or expanding options for paid parental and disability leave.

The type of flexibility a company offers depends on its particular business model, resources, and goals, but there are plenty of options that support employee well-being:

FLEXIBLE WORKPLACE SOLUTIONS

- Fully remote work
- Hybrid model
- Flexible hours
- Condensed work weeks
- Flexible arrangements, like part-time work
- Choice and control of shifts
- More PTO
- Creative compromises, like half-day Fridays or longer lunch breaks
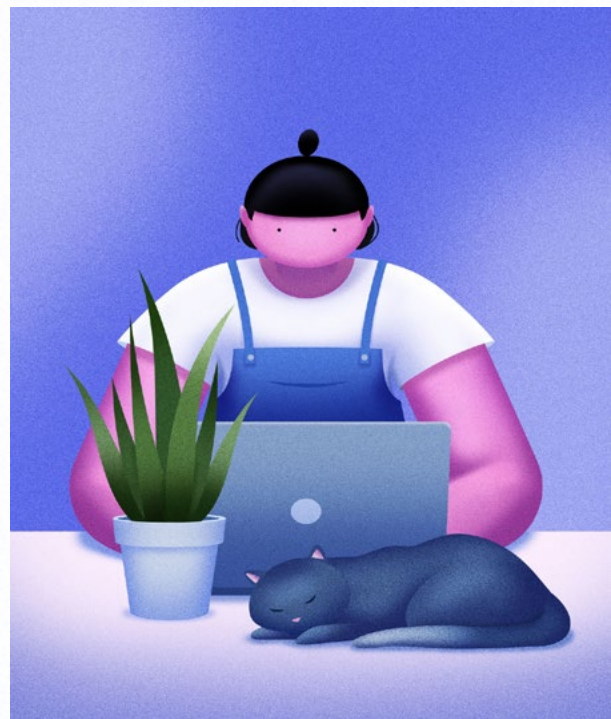
Case study

More flexibility creates happier employees

When companies show a willingness to be flexible, employees thrive. Having more options for when and where to work means employees can spend less time trying to adhere to rigid company policies and more time investing in their health.

Flexibility also helps employees—and companies as a whole—better adapt to change and overcome difficulties. In fact, 73% of workers say their companies can be more resilient if company plans and approaches are flexible.[44]

73% | Say companies can be more resilient if they increase flexibility

GITHUB

Developer platform **GitHub** has figured out that their best recipe for success is complete employee flexibility. They operate with a "work from wherever" policy that gives employees the freedom to choose the setup that suits them best. Over half of **GitHub**'s employees work from home (and receive a $1,500 stipend to set up their home offices), about a quarter work from the San Francisco headquarters, and the rest work in a local office or co-working space.[45]

GitHub also offers flexible work schedules, which allow employees to set their own hours, as well as flexible PTO, which gives employees the ability to take as much time off work as they need to recharge.[46] As a result, **Github** has a strong level of employee happiness, with a culture score of 4.3 out of 5 on Comparably, and 85% positive employee reviews.[47]

85% | Github has 85% positive employee reviews

Another company paving the way in employee flexibility is dating app **Bumble**. After realizing that their employees were struggling with pandemic-related burnout, **Bumble** made the decision to offer two company-wide week long paid vacations a year, on top of offering unlimited PTO with uniform minimums.

The company also adapted their working policies to better support employees' mental health. Beyond embracing a work-from-home model, **Bumble** is also facilitating the use of co-working spaces for employees who don't want to work from home and expanding leave offerings for employees who become parents, act as family caregivers, or suffer a loss.

"The way that we work and need to work has changed, and our new policies are a reflection of what really matters and how we can best support our teams in both their work and life," said Tariq Shaukat, president of Bumble.[48]

The takeaway
There are plenty of different ways companies can offer employees more flexibility. Flexible benefits, flexible working hours, *and* flexible working policies all contribute to greater employee satisfaction and stronger mental health.

Expanding flexibility for more mental freedom

APPLICATION STRATEGIES

Flexibility comes in many forms. To offer employees adequate flexibility, companies need to reevaluate their priorities, re-allocate resources, and embrace new possibilities and structures. Here are four steps to take:

Find out what employees want

Take some time to understand your company's needs. Not every department or team needs the same options, nor does every individual employee want the same benefits. Creating a tailored, comprehensive flexibility plan is key to making employees happy.

Survey employees
Ask questions about their satisfaction with work hours, the general work week, PTO policies, and more. You can also suggest flexible changes and ask employees to rank their preferences.

Hold one-on-one meetings with managers
Sit down with supervisors and managers from different departments to discuss successful work solutions and identify areas for improvement.

Choose the right approach

Though a majority of employees would appreciate the option to work from home, there's no one-size-fits-all solution that works for every company. What's right for your workplace depends on your business model, customer needs, internal resources, and employee concerns.

Consider what's realistic

Sit down with executives and leaders to determine what's realistic for your company, whether it's offering remote options, telecommuting benefits, or personalized shifts.

Evaluate your resources

Think about what types of changes you'd need to make in order to update company policies—and how much money and time those changes will take. Migrating to a work-from-home structure, for example, may require investing in new software platforms to facilitate virtual communication, while letting employees choose their own shifts might force managers to spend more time organizing weekly schedules.

Brainstorm innovative offerings

There's more than one way to provide flexibility to your employees. Taking into account individual and department needs, brainstorm creative accommodations. You could offer:

- Fewer mandatory meetings
- Longer or more frequent breaks throughout the work day
- Flexible arrival and departure times
- Company-wide perks, like later start times on Mondays
- Designated PTO for doctor appointments, errands, and personal admin
- Company-wide vacation shutdowns
- Opportunities to take sabbaticals or extended breaks from work
- Longer and more expansive leave options for caregiving, bereavement, and burnout recovery

Keep adapting

Updating work policies and adjusting working arrangements demands flexibility on the part of companies. Not only do different generations and types of workers want different options and benefits, but external forces—like environmental, political, and health-related factors—can also influence what employees need for their mental health.

Stay attuned to employee needs
Send out at least one satisfaction and flexibility survey a year to gauge where employees are at. You can also send periodic surveys to address topical issues, like public health crises or natural disasters.

Pay attention to cultural shifts
Workplace trends can influence how employees feel about their work situations, so it's a good idea to clue into the culture by regularly reading business news, following top companies in your industry, and evaluating new studies on the workplace.

Building a *stronger, more resilient* workforce

It's more critical than ever for employers to take an active interest in their employees' mental health. Employees across all industries and time zones are struggling with issues like anxiety, burnout, and depression. They're dealing with increased work demands, prolonged stress, poor workplace communications, limited work flexibility, inadequate mental health resources, and a lack of understanding and emotional support.

Fortunately, employers have the ability to intervene and develop solutions that better support their employees' mental health. For effective, widespread results, change needs to start at the organizational level. Employers should rethink five key areas of their workplaces:

Workplace culture

Workplace culture bleeds into every aspect of work—from company rules and systems to employee happiness and mental health. Cultivating a more positive workplace culture has the power to drastically improve employees' overall well-being. By prioritizing purpose, expanding employee benefits, and communicating with empathy, employers can create an environment where employees feel supported and balanced.

Employee workload

Workload isn't just about the volume of work or amount of hours employees spend on the job— it's also about company policies and manager expectations surrounding work. Heavy workloads and rigid policies can lead to extreme exhaustion and mental health issues. To help employees maintain a manageable workload, employers need to rethink their definition of productivity, reevaluate the way they distribute work, and offer employees more practical support.

Workplace communication

The communication within a workplace can either exacerbate or alleviate employee mental health issues. What's more, the frequency and clarity of communications matters just as much as the tone employers adopt and the subjects they discuss. When companies speak openly about mental health, lead with inclusivity and compassion, and set clear guidelines for employee roles and responsibilities, employees are more likely to feel valued and cared for at work.

Employee growth

Stronger mental health comes when employees are both professionally challenged and personally fulfilled. Employers can support employees in their professional development by giving them opportunities to learn new skills or deepen their knowledge; and companies can support employees' personal enrichment by giving them the freedom and tools to invest in meaningful activities and pursuits outside the workplace.

Flexibility

The more flexibility workers have to do their jobs, the more likely they are to prioritize their health and achieve a better work-life balance. To provide more flexibility, employers need to reconsider how, when, where, and how often employees work. Giving employees more control over their schedules, more freedom in choosing their hours, and more discretion over their work environment has a big impact.

Strong employee mental health is at the core of every successful company. When employers take the time to make thoughtful, strategic organizational changes to workplace mental health, individual employees can thrive—in and out of the workplace.

Bring Calm to your workplace

Give your employees the well-being support they need with Calm for Business. Our comprehensive and stigma-free mental wellness platform is designed to support employee well-being by promoting better sleep, reducing stress and anxiety, and teaching mindfulness. We offer a diverse range of evidence-based resources, including guided breathing and meditation, Sleep Stories, stretching exercises, music and nature sounds, and masterclasses on topics like creativity, peak performance, and more.

See why 1,500+ partners have utilized Calm to help their employees live happier, healthier lives.

Book a demo today

Business

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