

Mental health sickness and presenteeism creeping back up in the post-COVID workplace, study shows

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Workplace absences due to mental health sickness have increased in 2022 after falling during the pandemic, a new study suggests.

The incidence of 'presenteeism' - employees working whilst they are unwell - has also increased, although it has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels.

More firms say that mental health-related sickness is impacting on business performance.

The study, conducted by the Enterprise Research Centre (ERC) based at Warwick Business School, tracked the experiences of 237 firms dealing with mental health and wellbeing from 2020, just before the pandemic began, through 2021 and 2022.

Thirty-three per cent of firms reported having staff with mental health related sickness absence prior to the pandemic. This declined to 26 per cent in 2021, rising to 30 per cent in 2022.

Thirty-five per cent of firms reported issues with presenteeism in 2020, but this fell markedly to 20 per cent in 2021, increasing again to 26 per cent in 2022.

The proportion of firms reporting that mental health-related sickness absence is impacting on their business followed the same pattern, with 58 per cent reporting business impacts in 2020, falling to 51 per cent in 2021, and rising again to 57 per cent in 2022.

The main impacts reported include effects on colleagues and morale; impacts on costs and efficiency problems. In previous analysis the researchers previously estimated that workplace mental health problems could reduce the overall productivity of firms by a quarter.

Report author Dr Maria Wishart said: *"Our findings provide a warning of the growing mental health problems in UK workplaces as they re-adjust after the pandemic.*

"This may reflect a reduction in remote working, with 62 per cent of firms telling us that all staff who had been working remotely during the pandemic are now back to their previous working patterns.

"It is possible that increased levels of homeworking meant fewer mental health issues. Alternatively, it may have meant that mental health conditions were more likely to go unnoticed, as our previous research showed that the pandemic created several new triggers for mental ill-health."

Alongside the rise in mental health problems, the study found evidence of more positive trends.

More firms are funding mental health initiatives, and more have dedicated mental health budgets, up from around 31 per cent of firms in 2020 to nearly 37 per cent in 2022.

More firms are also adopting specific initiatives, including awareness raising programmes for staff and providing line manager training in identifying mental health issues

The number of firms with employee mental health champions has risen sharply (from 29 per cent in 2020 to 43 per cent in 2022).

There was also an increase in the provision of counselling and personal resilience training, alongside evidence of greater employer engagement with mental health organisations. Around 20 per cent of firms said that they would approach a mental health organisation for help and advice in 2022, up from 15 per cent in 2020 and only 11 per cent in 2021.

Dr Wishart said *“Although it is encouraging to see that more employers are taking the mental health of their workforce seriously and are funding initiatives, the majority still do not do so. This is particularly the case for smaller businesses.*

“Our previous research has also shown that workplace mental health problems have a real impact on productivity, so there is also a strong business case for taking mental health seriously, particularly in the challenging economic times we now face.”

The Mental Health and Productivity Pilot (MHPP), an initiative funded by Midlands Engine, has been helping companies across the Midlands to take steps to support and improve the mental health of their workforce – and boost their bottom line at the same time.

Sean Russell, MHPP Programme Director said: *“It’s great to hear from this latest ERC research that more and more Midlands firms are putting initiatives in place to support employee mental wellbeing. We now need to understand whether this positive action is actually having an impact on organisational productivity as well as improving employee mental wellbeing.*

“The next phase of our programme focuses on that. Through our partnership of academic experts across the Midlands, we are working with organisations of all sizes, not only to give them access to evidence based mental wellbeing initiatives, but to understand individual organisations’ challenges and provide them with a bespoke response that is tailored to their specific need.”

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Notes to editors

1. Full report, **Workplace mental health and well-being during COVID-19: Evidence from three waves of employer surveys** is available here: <https://www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk/publications/workplace-mental-health-and-well-being-during-covid-19-evidence-from-three-waves-of-employer-surveys/>
2. This study is part of an ongoing ERC research programme on mental health and productivity. This began in 2020, with a first survey completed immediately prior to the first UK lock-down in March, providing a pre-COVID baseline. In 2021 between January and April the survey was repeated during the 3rd national lockdown in England, a period when many employees were working from home and many more were on furlough. In 2022, a third survey was conducted in January and April, a period after the easing of COVID-19 restrictions in England (July 2021) and the end of the furlough scheme in September 2021. The next survey will be carried out in 2023.

3. About the Enterprise Research Centre: The ERC is the UK's leading independent research institute on productivity and innovation in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), Innovate UK, The Intellectual Property Office (IPO) and the British Business Bank (BBB). The Centre is led by Professors Stephen Roper of Warwick Business School and Mark Hart of Aston University, Birmingham.
<http://www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk>
4. About the MHPP: MHPP is led by Coventry University in partnership with the University of Warwick, the West Midlands Combined Authority, mental health charity Mind and the universities of Birmingham, Derby, Lincoln, Loughborough and Nottingham. Businesses can find out more about the support available from MHPP at www.mhpp.me/employers