

## **Workplace presenteeism exceeds pre-pandemic levels as more businesses affected by mental health issues, report reveals**

The number of employees working while they are unwell and exceeding their contracted hours has risen dramatically, a new report shows.

The study found that 37 per cent of businesses reported problems with 'presenteeism' in 2023, a marked increase from 21 per cent last year and exceeding pre-pandemic levels for the first time.

More than a quarter of firms also said staff had missed work due to mental health-related sickness.

The Enterprise Research Centre (ERC) at Warwick Business School surveyed 1,900 firms for the fourth consecutive year.

The proportion of firms that said mental health-related absences had adversely affected their operations rose to 58 per cent, up from 53 per cent in 2022.

Previous analysis by ERC researchers estimated that firms experiencing workplace mental health issues could see productivity drop by 25 per cent.

Lead researcher Dr Maria Wishart said: "Our research indicates that presenteeism is a growing problem in the workplace, affecting more than a third of the employers we surveyed.

"It is concerning to hear that staff are working when ill or beyond their contracted hours in so many firms when we know that this can have negative impacts on health and wellbeing, such as stress and burnout.

"The situation is even more worrying, given that more employers are also reporting that mental health sickness absence is impacting how their organisations operate day to day, causing lower productivity, efficiency, and service levels, as well as increasing pressure on colleagues."

The study found that despite the rise in mental health issues in the workplace, the proportion of firms adopting initiatives to address them was not increasing.

There was an initial rise in firms providing mental health support when the pandemic first struck, but levels had remained steady for the last three years. Just 52 per cent of firms said they had implemented practices designed to address workplace mental health issues.

Dr Wishart said: "Although some employers are taking action to protect the mental health of their employees, nearly half do not have any initiatives in place, and a stubborn 18 per cent told us that they have no plans to do so in the future either.

"However, there is an opportunity for positive change as 80 per cent of firms acknowledged that employers have some responsibility for workplace mental health issues. There has also been a substantial rise in firms that report training line managers to deal with mental health issues."

The report recommends greater partnership working between employers, human resources specialists, and mental health charities, as well as more tailored support for firms to help tackle the increase in workplace mental health issues since the pandemic.

Dr Wishart said: "While signposting employers towards external resources is undoubtedly useful, the magnitude of the problem shows it is time for a more concerted approach.

"This could include financial incentives to encourage employers to take a more formal approach to managing mental wellbeing at work. Initiatives that support employers to develop mental health activities tailored for their own environments may also motivate the persistent non-adopters to engage with this important issue."



## Notes to editors

1. The full report, **Workplace Mental Health in Midlands firms 2023: A longitudinal study** is available here: <https://www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk/publications/workplace-mental-health-in-midlands-firms-2023-a-longitudinal-study/>
2. This study is part of an ongoing ERC research programme on mental health and productivity, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. This began in 2020, with a first survey (funded by the Midlands Engine) completed immediately prior to the first UK lock-down in March, providing a pre-COVID baseline.
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 and Trade, 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>.

