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DIGITAL
Health
AWARDS
WINNER
FALL 2021

2021 STATE OF
WORKPLACE
EMPATHY

**DECLINING MENTAL
HEALTH** REQUIRES
EMPLOYER EMPATHY

The parallel crises of dealing with COVID-19 and reckoning anew with our nation's painful history of racial and social injustice has thrust mental health into the national spotlight.

In June 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that 41% of Americans over age 18 struggled with mental health or substance abuse[1]. Among them, 31% reported symptoms of anxiety and depression, compared to 11% the previous year[2]. The same study found that 26% reported symptoms of trauma or a stressor-related disorder, 13% had started or increased substance use, and 11% had seriously considered suicide.

The HR community has long known about the impact of mental health issues on worker productivity, disability, absenteeism, and presenteeism. As early as 2003, depression alone cost U.S. employers up to $44 billion annually[3] in lost productivity. But the events of 2020 made investing in employee mental health about much more than protecting the bottom line. **For many employers, their response to mental health needs in 2020 was viewed as a sincere and direct expression of workplace empathy.**

Mental health is a broad domain of personal wellness that includes individuals' emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act—both in and out of the workplace.

Empathy is the ability to understand and experience the feelings of another.

1 Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, June 24–30, 2020. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Aug. 14, 2020.
2 Anxiety and Depression Household Pulse Survey. National Center for Health Statistics. April 7, 2021.
3 Cost of Lost Productive Work Time Among US Workers with Depression. JAMA. June 18, 2003.

Based on our 2021 State of Workplace Empathy data, we explore those expressions of empathy around mental health—and more importantly—how they are perceived by employees, HR professionals, and CEOs. Conducted by a third-party research firm in February, our findings reveal that employees have new, and larger, expectations around mental health in the workplace. **Once regarded as especially empathetic expressions of workplace empathy, mental health benefits and programs have now become table stakes.**

The data also shows that effectively deploying communication and assistance around mental health is still a challenge for most workplaces. **Many employees remain unaware of employer benefits to support mental health, and few are reaching out for help at work.**

41%
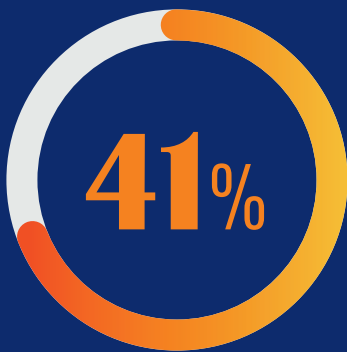
of Americans now struggle with mental health or substance abuse.

Employers lose

$44 billion

per year in productivity due to depression alone.

Empathy and Mental Health Benefits Matter

In 2021, the business case remains strong.

Our 2021 State of Workplace Empathy data reveals that 88% of employees and HR professionals would be more likely to stay with an employer that empathized with their needs. Among CEOs, 94% said they would be willing to work longer hours for an empathetic employer.

Thus, the business case for workplace empathy—already strong—is made even stronger when taking into account mental health. **An overwhelming majority (95%) of employees in 2021 believe that organizations that offer mental health benefits are more empathetic** than those that do not—5 points higher than in 2020. It's also important to note that 95% of HR professionals and 94% of employees and CEOs say mental health is just as important as physical health.

The 2021 data also indicates that employers made moderate headway in supporting mental health. **Employees who believe their organization openly discusses the importance of mental health with them increased from 58% in 2020 to 65% in 2021.** And 76% of employees say all levels of their organization are empathetic to employees' mental health—a 7-point improvement over last year.

Despite these moderate gains, there is consensus that the pandemic makes the case for increased investment. **After nearly a year into the pandemic, our 2021 data shows that 91% of HR professionals and 88% of employees think organizations should be doing more to promote mental health, given the effects of COVID-19.**

94% of employees say mental health is as important as physical health.

95% of employees say organizations with mental health programs are more empathetic.
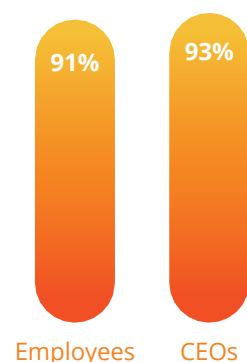
91% Employees
93% CEOs
Employers that recognize the importance of mental health are more likely to retain employees.

Stigma Persists Around Talking About Mental Health at Work

Employees, HR professionals, and CEOs all say organizations will view mental health issues as a "burden."

While employees report a higher level of awareness of available mental health benefits in 2021, a considerable amount of stigma persists. Among CEOs, 96% say they have a safe environment to talk about mental health at work, but only 71% of HR professionals and 73% of employees agree. **And 64% of employees say that reaching out to HR or management about a mental health issue would negatively impact their job security.**

CEOs are also far more likely to ask for help with mental health issues. **In 2021, 85% of CEOs say they reached out to someone at work—more than the percentages of employees (37%) and HR professionals (46%) combined.** Among those CEOs who did, 93% say the response they received was empathetic, compared to 88% of employees and 82% of HR professionals who reached out.

Perhaps the most troubling finding related to mental health in 2021 is respondents' perceptions of those with mental illness. **A staggering 66% of employees, 75% of HR professionals, and 82% of CEOs perceive that employers will view someone with mental health issues as a "burden."** By comparison, 36% of employed Americans with a physical disability encountered some type of workplace discrimination because of their disability[4].

Younger workers are particularly sensitive to perceptions of mental illness in the workplace. **Gen Z (73%) and Millennials (76%) think organizations take a negative view of employees with mental health issues.** This is especially unfortunate, as awareness of mental health programming is disproportionately low among these demographics.

4 University Graduates with a Disability: The Transition to the Workforce. Disability Studies Quarterly. Vol 32, No 3 (2012).

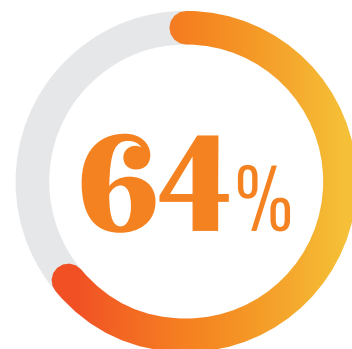**Despite a greater urgency to address mental health, large majorities of the workforce report difficulty discussing it.**

Companies view those with mental health issues as a burden:

Employees	66%
HR Pros	75%
CEOs	82%

64%

of employees say asking for help jeopardizes job security.

Gaps Exist in Awareness and Perceptions of Mental Health Benefits

Employees lag far behind CEOs.

First, some good news: **In 2021, 56% of employees say they were aware of mental health benefits and programs offered by their organization—a 10% increase over last year.** That said, awareness is much higher among CEOs (74%) and HR professionals (64%). There's also an awareness discrepancy around expanded mental health offerings due to the pandemic, with 94% of CEOs demonstrating awareness compared to 66% of employees.

The survey also revealed a lack of awareness of employee assistance programs (EAPs). **Only 29% of employees say they're aware of their organization having an EAP that offers supportive, diagnostic, referral and counseling treatment services.** Awareness within HR teams is even lower, at 21%. But according to the International Employee Assistance Professional Association, 75% to 97% of organizations do, in fact, have an EAP[5].

There is also a gap between CEOs and employees in perceptions of how mental health is discussed in the workplace. As noted, 65% of employees believe there is open dialogue within their organization about the importance of mental health. **Among CEOs, however, 89% believe this to be the case—a difference of 24 points.** More CEOs (88%) also believe their organization conducts workshops or has training to educate employees about mental health, compared to only 59% of employees.

Further evidence of a perception gap between upper management and employees is that 76% of employees say that all levels of their organization are empathetic to employees' mental health. While this represents an improvement over the previous year, it's still 20 percentage points behind the 96% of CEOs who believe this to be the case.

28%

of employees believe their organization offers COVID-19-related mental health benefits

Awareness of mental health benefits among CEOs is 18 percentage points higher than employees.

5 Top 5 Reasons Employees May Hesitate to Use the EAP. Workplace Solutions. Feb. 18, 2018.

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Diverse Preferences Reflect a Diverse Workforce

One size doesn't fit all.

While all respondents believe it's important to support mental health in the workplace, some benefits and programs appear to be more valuable depending on one's professional role and personal background—hardly surprising considering the generational, racial, and cultural diversity of today's workforce.

That said, some benefits are popular across the board. **At or near the top of the list for employees, HR professionals, and CEOs is flexible work hours.** Being encouraged to take breaks away from the work environment and open-door policies for face-to-face communication with management or HR representatives ranked high among employees and HR professionals. CEOs and HR professionals' highest shared value was mental health vacation days.

Among Black employees, 93% prefer coverage options for mental health services through the employee benefits enrollment process. Compared to their white counterparts, Black employees place additional importance on access to onsite mental health care specialists (+15 points), workplace support groups (+13 points), and virtual sessions with a mental health specialist (+11 points).

Providing certain benefits and promoting them to targeted populations is an opportunity to demonstrate empathy to key demographics, while the most popular benefits are now table stakes.

To address mental health, flexible work hours rank high.

Employees	66%
HR Pros	75%
CEOs	82%

Topping the list for Latinx employees at 94% is being encouraged to take breaks away from the work environment. This is followed closely (93%) by an EAP that provides supportive, diagnostic, referral, and counseling treatment services. Compared to their white counterparts, Latinx employees preferred onsite mental health care specialists (+17 points), wellness workshops that focus on mental and physical health (+7 points), and mental health vacation days (+4 points).

Workplace support groups are popular among CEOs, who rank these 20 points higher than HR professionals and employees. This represents an opportunity for executive leaders to promote this resource through their personal experiences throughout their organization. HR professionals preferred wellness workshops 9 points higher than employees and 6 points higher than CEOs.

The biggest generational differences are seen among Gen Z—that population of the workforce born after 1997. Compared to other generations, fewer Gen Z employees say flexible work hours, an open-door policy, and frequent breaks are important, suggesting the newest generation to the workforce may consider these offerings to be table stakes. Gen Z employees—also known as digital natives—place greater importance on live video sessions with a specialist compared to Boomers (+15 points), Gen X (+4 points), and Millennials (+2 points).

93%

of Black employees want coverage for mental health services provided at the time of enrollment.

93%

of Latinx employees prefer employee assistance programs.

Five Steps for Supporting Mental Health

Empathetic employers can keep the momentum going.

In the wake of the pandemic and our new national reckoning on racial and social injustice, employees, HR professionals, and CEOs resoundingly agree: **Now is the time to provide more—not less—support for employee mental health.** This is a unique moment in our history—a time when mental health has been thrust into the spotlight, presenting organizations with an opportunity to demonstrate workplace empathy on a scale not seen in decades.

The question is, how? Especially considering the stigma associated with mental health, the clear gaps in awareness between employees and leadership, and the challenges of an increasingly diverse workforce, what can employers do?

Based on our 2021 State of Workplace Empathy data, we've outlined five recommendations for employers to incorporate into a long-term strategy to achieve a more empathetic workplace, increase employee loyalty, and optimize employee productivity.

1. Start by listening.

Clear trends emerged through the analysis of the 2021 State of Workplace Empathy data. As an expression of empathy, some mental health benefits are now table stakes. Others may be more preferred based on one's role, ethnic background, and other demographics.

While these are good benchmarks to begin a conversation between HR teams and executive leaders to raise awareness, there's no substitute for listening to employees. HR professionals can do this by:

▶ **Publicly acknowledging** that employees need help, including populations that may be disproportionally affected.

▶ **Conducting an anonymous employee survey** or holding judgement-free listening sessions.

▶ **Analyzing medical and pharmacy data** to identify comorbidities and other trends associated with mental illness.

2. Bridge gaps and communicate.

While the events of the last year have made it easier to broach the topic, our data shows clearly that addressing mental health in the workplace is still difficult. In fact, it's easy to assume someone else is on the case. Executive leadership may think HR has everything covered, while HR leaders are waiting for direction from the top.

Even when organizations are taking action, that good work runs the risk of going unnoticed—again, perhaps because stakeholders don't know how to talk about it. To ensure employees are informed and empowered, HR teams can:

▶ **Facilitate a culture of transparency** by reporting aggregate data from the discovery efforts outlined in the first action step.

▶ **Lay out an action** plan for addressing employees' most pressing needs.

▶ **Increase supervisors' comfort level** by providing training and talking points.

3. Make it a top-down organizational priority.

Following the shocking suicides of Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain in 2018, Cisco CEO Chuck Robbins felt compelled to address the matter with his employees.

"*In light of recent tragedies, I wanted to ... talk about the importance of mental health*," he wrote in an all-staff email. "*Unfortunately, we all know friends, family, and coworkers battling mental health conditions, or maybe you're going through your own struggles*."[6]

Throughout his message, Robbins encouraged employees to "talk openly and extend compassion," and asked that they "have each other's backs." Most importantly, he told them that professional support was available. Within days, more than 100 Cisco employees replied back to Robbins, some sharing their personal struggles in painful detail. Thus began Cisco's efforts to "end the mental health taboo"—an organizational priority that continues to this day.

While not all organizations have a CEO (in this case a "chief empathy officer") like Robbins, HR teams can:

▶ **Identify a senior leader who is willing to share their personal experiences** through blogs, live chats, interviews, or other formats. With 60% of senior executives claiming they experienced some type of mental health issue in the last 12 months, finding a champion might be easier than believed.

▶ **Regularly deliver messages from senior leaders** about mental health benefits and resources in your most highly visible and periodic employee touchpoints, such as staff meetings, quarterly reports or employee newsletters.

▶ **Maximize your benefits platform** for year-round communication about mental health and personalize the benefits experience wherever possible.

60%

of senior executives claim they experienced some type of mental health issue in the last 12 months.

6 Cisco's CEO Surprised Employees with Emails about Mental Illness after the June Suicides of Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain. CNBC. Nov. 18, 2018.

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4. Normalize it.

A significant barrier to demonstrating workplace empathy through mental health initiatives is the stigma associated with conditions like anxiety, depression, substance abuse, trauma, and many other mental and behavioral health issues.

Fortunately, HR professionals are in a unique position to substantially reduce that stigma within the culture over which they hold so much influence. To do so, they can:

▶ **Stop the silence.** HR professionals may be among the first people an employee approaches about experiencing a mental illness. First and foremost, avoid those awkward silences. Show empathy, acknowledge their experiences, and ask questions—then point them toward benefits, programs, and resources.

▶ **Be mindful of the language used to talk about mental health.** When someone is reaching out for help, phrases like, "Snap out of it," or "Everyone feels that way sometimes," can stop them in their tracks. Try saying, "Thanks for sharing," or "I can't imagine what you're going through." Learn about other helpful alternatives at MakeItOk.org.

▶ **Assert equity between physical and mental illness** when communicating with employees about resources to support them, especially popular benefits such as flexible hours or time off for mental health—keeping in mind that 94% of employees already believe that mental health is just as important as physical health.

94%

of employees already believe that mental health is just as important as physical health.

5. Model self-care and help seeking.

HR professionals have always been on the front lines. That was clear in 2020, it's continued into 2021, and there's no reason to believe organizations won't rely on these seasoned soldiers for the next big challenge. If anyone knows that empathy can be learned, it's HR.

But we all have our limits. HR burnout is real. In fact, nearly 2/3 of full-time workers, including those in HR, deal with burnout at some point while at work[7]. To ensure they can continue serving others, HR pros need to make sure to:

▶ **Switch things up.** Fortunately for HR, the wide variety of responsibilities within teams provides fertile ground for cross-training. Would a payroll specialist benefit from leading a new retention initiative? Is it time for a hiring manager to try benefits consulting?

▶ **Prioritize self-care.** Research makes a strong case for maintaining physical health as a way to reduce burnout. Getting quality sleep, staying active, and going outside play important roles in maintaining the physical fitness required to effectively manage stress.

▶ **Know when to ask for help.** Working in HR/benefits increases the risk of burnout due to burdensome administrative tasks like manual data entry, fixing vendor files, processing dependent verifications, etc. Outsourcing even a few of your administrative tasks, especially those that can be automated, can help your team focus on more strategic (and more personally rewarding) endeavors.

7 Employee Burnout, Part 1: The 5 Main Causes. Gallup. July 12, 2018.

Nearly

2/3

of full-time workers, including those in HR, deal with burnout at some point while at work.

Ready to learn more?

Check out our Mental Health Toolkit for Employers.

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