



香港城市精神健康聯盟

**City Mental Health
Alliance** HK

Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Workplace: Survey of Hong Kong Employees

DECEMBER 2022



INTRODUCTION

The period 2020 to 2022 in Hong Kong was marked by fluctuations in the Covid pandemic and the impact of changes in government policies on quarantines, access to public and private facilities, vaccinations and testing. Companies adapted with flexible working arrangements, virtual meetings and other accommodations, resulting in dramatically changed working practices and environments from what was the norm before 2020.

For Hong Kong employees in the professional services sector, the impact of the pandemic resulted in uncertainty around job and financial security due to the economic downturn, and the need to adjust to changing work practices. Moreover, the waves of Covid infections in Hong Kong sparked fear around personal health and safety and with it pressure and uncertainty related to care responsibilities for children and elderly relatives.

These, and other areas of workplace and personal stress were included in the City Mental Health Alliance Hong Kong (CMHA HK) 2022 Employee Wellbeing Survey. The data from the survey builds on previous surveys conducted in 2017, 2018, and 2020 and provides CMHA HK with important longitudinal data on the workplace practices and significant external factors that impact on employee mental health in the professional services sector of Hong Kong.

Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of employees is increasingly recognised as a core business responsibility, both as a duty of care during these years of uncertainty, and as key component of good business practice to support productivity, sustainability and growth. Mental health is now firmly on the agenda for senior leaders and the importance of investigating how these efforts are received by employees and their impact, is recognised by CMHA HK as a key part of our research to inform business practice.

In conducting the 2022 survey the primary aims of the research are to:

1. understand how changes in workplace practices during the Covid pandemic impacted on the mental health and wellbeing of employees in the Hong Kong professional services sector
2. investigate employee response to employer efforts to create mentally healthy workplaces and how effective these measures have been, and
3. examine whether issues identified in the 2020 research have been addressed and based on the 2022 data, highlight key focus areas for the coming years.

CMHA HK employee and workplace research addresses two sides:

- **the input side** - through our annual Thriving at Work Assessment Survey which allows companies to self-audit the strategies and initiatives they have implemented to support employee mental health and wellbeing and identify any gaps; and
- **the output or employee side** - through our Employee Wellbeing Survey which measures how employees respond to workplace and external stressors and their use and assessment of the resources, services and activities offered by employers.

Both surveys draw on the [CMHA HK Guide to Thriving at Work](#), our keystone document which sets out the standards and initiatives required for an effective workplace mental health strategy and the delivery of resources and programs to support employee mental health and wellbeing. These core CMHA HK resources combine to provide a comprehensive approach to creating a mentally healthy workplace and quantified measurement tools to assess workplace mental health and employee wellbeing.

In 2022 the **CMHA HK Employee Wellbeing Survey** was offered to all Hong Kong member companies to provide independent employee data through an external survey process. As many member companies now undertake regular internal employee wellbeing surveys, some decided not to participate in the CMHA HK Employee Wellbeing Survey to maximise participation in their own surveys. Ultimately, 13 member companies participated and 396 employees completed the survey.

Some points to note about the survey:

- Participation is completely voluntary and anonymous.
- Analysis referring to participants experiencing mental health problems is based on self-report.
- The term “mental health problem” has been adopted to refer to “mental ill health” in both the survey questions and the results as it was felt to encompass a broader range of potential areas of concern and a more familiar term for respondents.
- All participating organisations are members of CMHA HK.
- Some but not all companies participating in the 2022 survey also participated in the surveys of 2018 and 2020.

These points should be considered when drawing comparison with past and future studies conducted by CMHA HK or other institutions.

Key finding #1: Hong Kong has seen a significant increase in mental health problems since 2020 and Covid-related stressors continue to negatively impact employee mental health.

Prevalence of mental health among employees

Among Hong Kong employees surveyed in 2022, 40% reported they had experienced mental health problems in the last 12 months. This is a significant increase from 27% reported in 2020 and 23% reported in the 2018.

This increased prevalence of mental health problems may be a result of the uncertainty and stressors related to the Covid pandemic, but could also be attributed to an increase in mental health literacy and a greater awareness among employees of their own mental health and a willingness to be open about this.

Examining mental health reporting by employee groups, the largest increase was found among administration staff whose rate of mental health problems increased from 15% in 2020 to 41% in 2022. In 2020, junior management/senior staff and junior staff were found to have the highest rate of mental health problems, at 32% and 36% respectively, while in 2022 they are close to average with 42% and 41% respectively.

Employees who experienced mental health problems in the past 12 months

Hong Kong 2018, 2020, 2022; % of respondents; N=424 (2018), N=732 (2020), N=319 (2022)

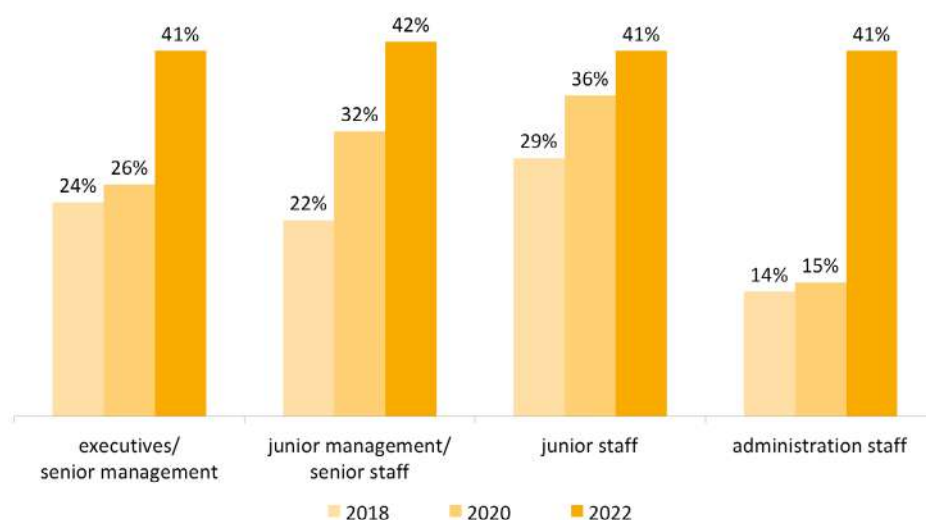


Figure 1
Source CMHA HK
Employee Survey
2022, 2020, 2018;
CMHA HK analysis

A deeper analysis of the data shows that:

- employees aged 20-40 years reported a higher rate of mental health problems, 46%, compared with 32% of those aged 41-70 years, possibly reflecting the pressures of being in early career, stress associated with a middle management position, or a greater awareness of mental health and higher willingness to acknowledge these stressors
- employees with childcare responsibilities reported below average levels of mental health problems (34%) as did those in junior management roles (35%).

Key stressors impacting on employee wellbeing

The top three stressors impacting negatively on employee wellbeing were identified as:



Travel restrictions (51%)



Hours worked (40%)



Covid (34%)

Across all employees, regardless of seniority or role, travel restrictions were identified as the most common stressor. At Director/C-suite level, 72% identified this as a stressor, higher than the 64% of employees who identified as expatriate in Hong Kong.

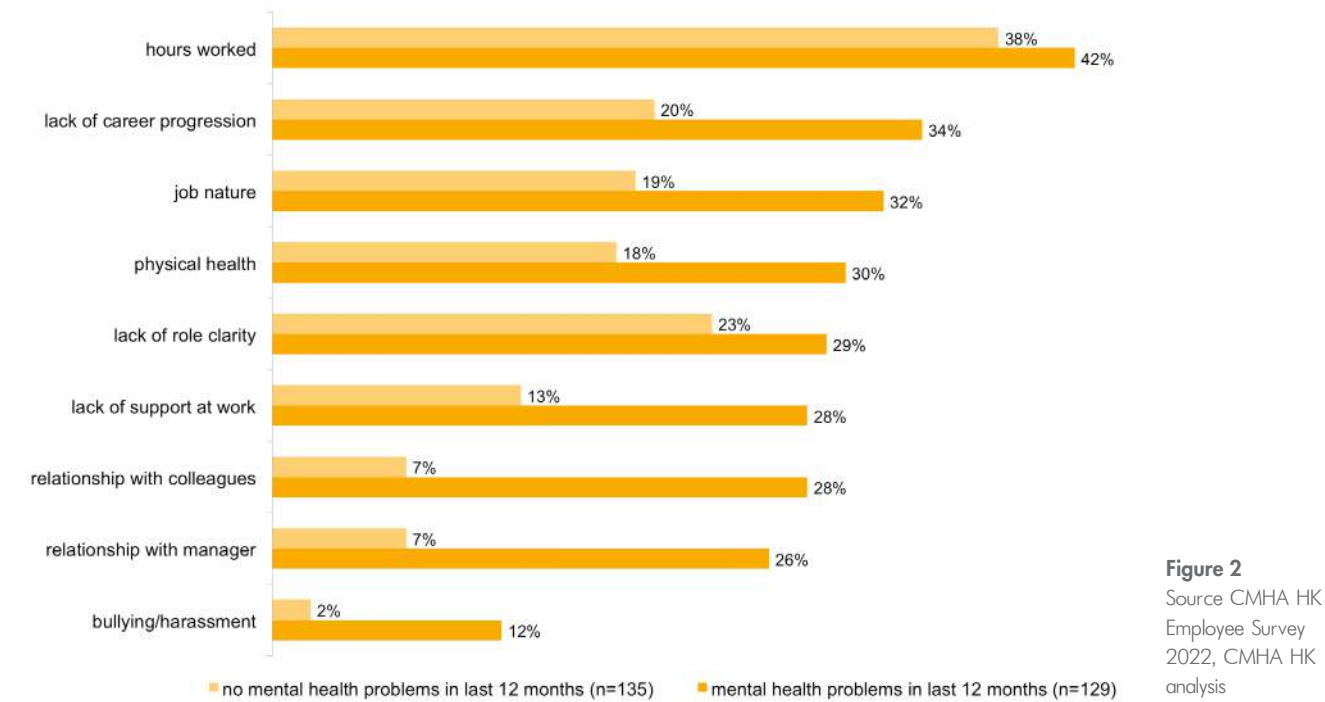
In 2020, as Covid was emerging, the top three stressors for APAC employees were: fear of contracting the disease (38%); lack of social activities (35%); and fear of job security (25%). Two years on, contracting Covid remains a key stressor for Hong Kong employees (34%), while fears around job security dropped to 9%. In 2020, 43% of APAC employees with children ranked child care as their main stressor, in 2022 this had fallen to 25% and was now a mid-level stressor for Hong Kong employees with children.

Those with mental health problems suffer more

Employees who indicated they had experienced mental health problems in the last 12 months generally reported higher levels of stress across all listed variables, particularly a lack of support at work; relationships with colleagues and managers; and bullying and harassment.

The data highlights the importance of providing additional support for what appears to be a growing proportion of employees. Increasing mental health literacy among managers, team leaders and the broader employee group, to ensure these stressors are understood and to advance cultural change within the organisation, would further support all employees to participate more equally in the workplace.

Stressors which negatively impact on employee wellbeing, past 12 months; employees with and without mental health problems, HK 2022; % of respondents; N=264



Symptoms experienced by Hong Kong employees

The survey found more than half of employees experienced symptoms which can be associated with mental health problems: nervousness and anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, and a loss of interest or pleasure in activities. While the 2020 report examined the mental health experience of employees across the APAC region, the data gathered for Hong Kong employees in 2022 is generally 20% points higher than that reported in 2020.

Symptoms reported by employees, HK 2022, % of respondents; N=326



Figure 3
Source CMHA HK Employee Survey 2022, CMHA HK analysis

Key finding #2: Employers have made substantial workplace adjustments to support employee mental health, but more can be done.

How effectively have workplace adjustments supported employee mental health?

The CMHA HK Thriving at Work Assessment is an internal assessment tool used by companies to audit their workplace mental health initiatives and receive a quantified analysis of their progress compared with their peers.

The 2022 survey found that among CMHA HK member companies:

- 82% had established a workplace mental health strategy to guide implementation
- 81% had implemented interventions and support initiatives providing culturally appropriate mental health support as well as preventative and early interventions
- 78% were using external campaigns such as World Mental Health Day to promote workplace mental health
- support for line managers increased by 32% from 2021 with the implementation of initiatives such as training in employee support and conducting difficult conversations
- companies who had been long-term members of CMHA HK (>2 years) showed a higher rate of improvement year on year (23%) than new members (16%).

The [Thriving at Work Assessment summary report](#) showed legal firms were most advanced in the range of initiatives implemented, particularly support for employee life cycle events and senior leader engagement. The finance sector scored highly in support for line managers and insurance companies generally scored lower, particularly in regard to senior leader engagement, line manager training, as well as intervention and support.



- **Legal employees** had a higher awareness of senior leader engagement with mental health activities and higher engagement with colleagues trained in Mental Health First Aid. Legal employees were also more informed on the range of services available and how to access support.



- **Insurance sector employees** were less informed on how to access support, reported they had no time to attend mental health activities, were less satisfied with employer mental health support and less confident to speak with line managers.



- **In the finance sector**, employees expressed greater confidence to provide mental health support to team members and employees reported high confidence in speaking to line managers about their mental health concerns.

Changing employee attitudes to mental health

The impact of employer efforts to raise employee mental health awareness and establish workplaces that support and encourage mentally healthy behaviour can be reflected in the attitudes of employees towards mental health. The Covid pandemic has been recognised as a catalyst for greater recognition of the need to support mental health and build personal and corporate resilience which further impacts on how employees relate to mental health.

The following word associations are based on responses to the question: What words come to mind when you think about mental health? In 2018 the negative attributes of stress, anxiety and depression were dominant, while in 2020, although stress still features, there was greater emphasis on happiness, rest and health. In 2022, stress remains the most frequent response, followed by depressed and anxiety, with a higher frequency of the words happiness and wellbeing than in previous years.

Words employees associate with “mental health” (font size = frequency of mention)



Figure 4
Source CMHA HK
Employee Survey
2022, 2020, 2018;
CMHA HK analysis

Flexible workplace practices

The Thriving at Work Assessment survey found member companies had established flexible work practices with an average score of 97% for this initiative. When asked how much of their time was spent working from home, 36% of employees reported all their time was in the office and three-quarters reported 80% of their time was in the office. Only one-fifth of employees worked from home more than 60% of the time, of which senior staff and senior management had the highest level, closely followed by junior management.

- 80% of employees were supported by online team meetings during work from home
- 41% received home office equipment from their employer or purchased equipment with an allowance (45%)
- 47% had regular check-ins with their line manager.

Employee interest in working from home was found to decline with seniority and age. While overall 81% of employees were interested in working from home, this was highest among those working in the back and corporate office (95%). Junior and senior staff and senior management also expressed a high level of interest (89-94%) to work from home. Employees recognise that working from home impacts how they work. While over 50% of employees said collaboration with colleagues and loneliness were not affected by working from home, 65% said social interaction with colleagues was negatively impacted, as were hours worked (47%), work/life separation (56%), and one third reported collaboration and loneliness were worse. Close to 50% of employees reported improved mental and physical wellbeing and productivity as a result of more flexible work practices.

Impact of working from home/remotely on employee work and personal life, HK 2022; % of respondents, N=233

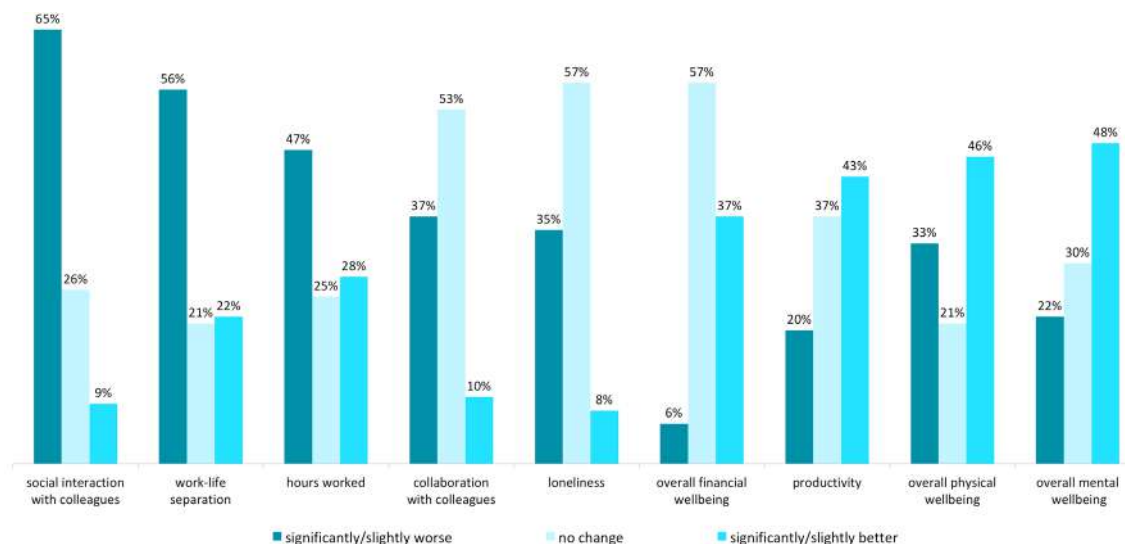


Figure 5
Source CMHA HK
Employee Survey
2022; CMHA HK
analysis

Flexible work practices, particularly the option to work from home, are valued by employees and bring with them a range of positive benefits that can support employee wellbeing. Employers should bear in mind the potential impact on inter-colleague relationships and time management. Supporting line managers and team leaders to establish team-based collaborative processes and the skills to ensure individual employees maintain mentally healthy work-life separation can support both productivity and physical and mental wellbeing.

“ ‘Allow staff the flexibility to plan their work. But fairness of policy is crucial. The same policy shall be applied to all staff.’ - Corporate, financial services, senior management

‘Despite many things being worse off, there are benefits to working at home including being closer to my family and not having to waste time commuting and getting ready for work.’ - Legal, senior staff

Key finding #3: Have we addressed the key issues identified in 2020?

Stigma

Stigma remains one of the key areas to address in order to facilitate conversations around mental health, to build confidence to provide support and to encourage people to seek help when they need it. Early intervention has been shown to reduce the time to recovery for those dealing with mental health problems.

In 2018 the number of employees reporting stigma was 55% for Hong Kong and in 2020 this figure had fallen to 33% for APAC (predominantly respondents from Hong Kong).

Employees reporting experience of stigma in the workplace HK 2018, 2022, APAC 2020; % of respondents; N=424 (2018), 732 (2020), 269 (2022)

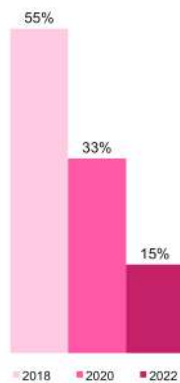


Figure 6
Source CMHA HK Employee Survey 2022, 2020, 2018; CMHA HK analysis

In 2022, employees reported experiencing the following types of mental health stigma or discrimination:

- 41% personal experience
- 44% experienced by a colleague
- 39% experienced by someone they know.

Mental health stigma can inhibit people to ask for and receive support for their mental health problems. In 2020, 55% of employees reported that they spoke with someone at work about their mental health. While this figure has dropped to 50% in the 2022 survey, a slightly higher proportion of employees are speaking with their manager, HR and Mental Health First Aiders. Accessing work-based resources and speaking with colleagues and line managers about mental health problems indicates that conversations around mental health are being conducted in the workplace, a sign that mental health stigma is being addressed.

Who respondents spoke with at work about their mental health problems

APAC 2018, 2020; HK 2022; % of respondents, N=85 (2018), 244 (2020), 130 (2022)

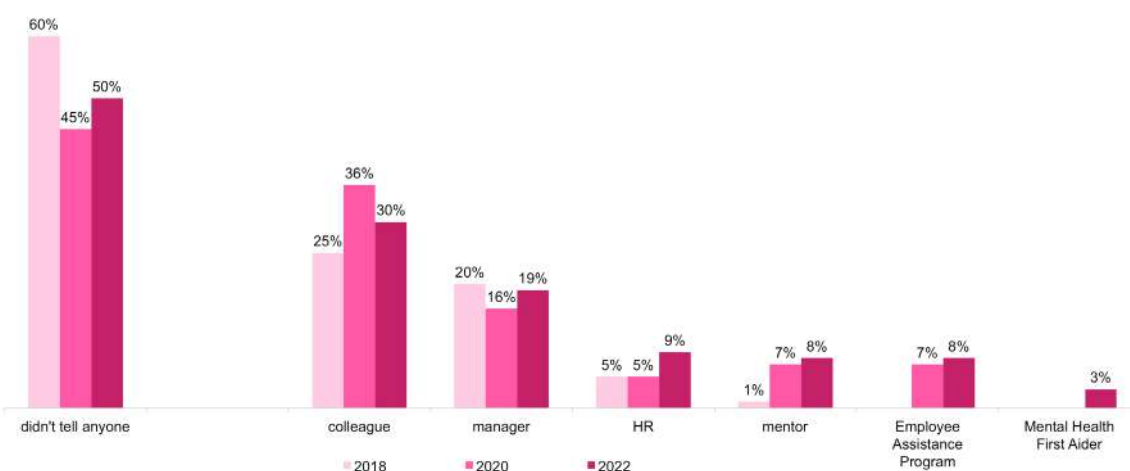


Figure 7
Source CMHA HK Employee Survey 2022; CMHA HK analysis

Among different levels of employee seniority there was a distinction in who they would discuss their mental health problems with.

- **Director/C-Suite:** 63% did not tell anyone at work. Of those who did, 67% approached a colleague, 50% talked with a manager, 33% with a mentor and 33% spoke with a Mental Health First Aider.
- **Junior staff:** 75% spoke with a colleague and only 13% spoke with either a manager, HR or used the EAP
- **Senior management:** 82% spoke with their manager

Presenteeism

Presenteeism can be defined as showing up for work but being limited in the performance of your tasks due to the influence of a mental health problem. It has implications for employers due to potentially reduced productivity despite employees being 'on duty' and, in the case of a mental health issue, that the employee may not receive the support they need to recover.

The expansion of flexible working arrangements during the Covid pandemic has resulted in presenteeism being more difficult to identify and manage. Employees working from home or elsewhere outside the office, are not directly supervised by their manager so important non-verbal cues of mental health problems may go undetected.

In response to a series of questions to measure their ability to work whilst dealing with mental health problems:

- 16% of employees stated they were unable to focus on achieving their goals
- 22% said they were unable to finish difficult tasks at work
- 21% stated that the stresses of their job were much harder to handle
- 12% felt hopeless about finishing certain work tasks
- 32% agreed that their mental health problems distracted them from being able to take pleasure in their work.

Based on the above responses, presenteeism was rated at 17.48(footnote) meaning respondents had a moderate ability to concentrate and finish their work tasks despite their mental health problems. Employees may mask their need for support to their manager and potentially themselves, resulting in a delay in seeking and receiving support.

Commonly cited reasons for presenting to work despite mental health problems

HK 2022; % of respondents, N=326



32% stated their mental health problems did not prevent them from working.

13% worked from home on days they experienced problems with their mental health.

The 2020 survey found that 76% of employees who experienced mental health problems in the last 12 months had performed below their own expectations at varying frequencies. Comparatively, the moderate SPS-6 score in this year's survey, with less than 25% of employees stating they had problems finishing tasks, dealing with stress and focussing on their work goals, appears comparatively lower than what was reported in 2020. We will continue to monitor this aspect of workplace mental health in future surveys using this new metric.

*Questions in the SPS-6 result in a score within the range of 6-30 where a low score indicates high presenteeism, meaning the individual is distracted by their health problem and finds it difficult to concentrate and finish work tasks. A high score indicates a person is able to concentrate and finish work despite health problems - low presenteeism.

Middle management crunch

The CMHA HK 2020 report on employee wellbeing raised concerns about the stress levels and lack of support experienced by employees in junior management and senior staff positions. Referred to as ‘middle management crunch’ these employees had the highest increase in mental health problems and reported a lack of access to and benefit from, employer provided support services.

The 2022 survey found that 23% of those in junior management positions showed signs of anxiety and depression and this group rated highest on the stress scale in relation to hours worked, a lack of career progression, and care duties. However, the survey found that 58% of junior managers made use of employer provided mental health services; most commonly off-site counselling, insurance, online resources, and Employee Assistance Package services. While in 2020 this group responded lowest in rating employer resources helpful, in 2022 63% of junior managers felt the resources provided by their employer were sufficient/somewhat sufficient to support their mental health.

The level of manager training and other support services that employers have actively promoted to this group since the 2020 survey appear to have made a mark in meeting the needs of this group.

Administration under increased pressure

The 2022 data showed that administration staff and assistants (admin staff) had the greatest increase in mental health problems since 2020, rising from 15% to 41%, and were under-represented in the support resources they accessed.

Admin staff showed the highest signs of depression and they ranked role clarity, hours worked and relations with colleagues as the highest sources of work-related stress. Among respondents, this group were most concerned about contracting Covid and their financial situation.

Although lack of support was not identified as an issue by admin staff, they were the lowest users of employer provided mental health services and were the least likely to share their mental health problems with people at work.



68% not using any employer mental health services



70% did not speak to anyone at work



46% did not feel confident to speak with their line manager



50% had personal experience of mental health stigma

Despite the low utilisation of employer mental health services, some admin staff did make use of mental health awareness sessions; on-site and off-site mental health counselling; medical insurance; expense reimbursement; and paid annual leave. Those who used these services considered them useful and the dominant reason given for not using services was uncertainty about seeking help.

Encouraging admin staff to make greater use of employer services and tailoring resources and services to suit their needs, is the obvious next step to ensure that this employee group receives the support they need to maintain their mental health and wellbeing.



Key finding #4: Employee access to and use of employer provided resources differs by seniority and role - we need to ensure all employees benefit.

The data revealed a trend that in general the use of employer mental health services increases with seniority. Utilisation rates of resources across seniority groups gives an insight into how each group feels about accessing mental health information via different mediums.

- Senior managers are the highest users of mental health related Apps (57%)
- Junior staff are the highest users of on-site counselling (57%)
- Senior managers, junior managers and Director/C-Suite are highest users of off-site counselling (36-42%)
- Junior and senior staff, senior managers and admin staff are highest users of information sessions (38-43%)
- 68% of admin staff did not use any services
- Junior staff are the next lowest users - 53% did not use any services

The primary reasons given by admin staff for not accessing services was because they were uncertain about seeking help and had confidentiality concerns, for junior staff it was predominantly confidentiality concerns and a lack of knowledge on how to access services. Senior staff and junior management were mostly uncertain about seeking help, with junior management and directors often reporting that they were unsure the resources would help.

“ **‘I am worried about the privacy, although I have pressure, I am not sure if the psychology therapy disclose to the company’** - Anon

‘In some ways the sessions make things worse: They are always organised during personal time or lunch time. They are perceived as only ‘patching up’ the problem, and not dealing with fundamental cultural toxic environments or lack of support for a proper work-life balance.’ -

Front Office, Legal, Senior Management



68%
of adminstration staff
did not make use of any
employer services.

Providing mental health resources in formats that suit the user and tailoring information to address particular lifecycle events is being effectively implemented by many established CMHA HK members. These companies are leading the way in recognising specific mental health needs across their employee groups and finding ways to effectively address these and provide the necessary support.



Key finding #5: Employers can consolidate the gains made through mentally healthy workplaces by focussing on three key areas.

#1: Retaining employees

The Covid pandemic caused widespread disruption across global markets and in 2020 our survey found employees were fearful about job security. More recent anecdotal evidence suggests that employers have faced difficulty recruiting and retaining staff, particularly in the Hong Kong professional services sector. For this reason, the 2022 survey included questions to investigate employee turnover intention to better understand what motivates employees to consider moving to a new employer and provide evidence to help employers increase employee retention.

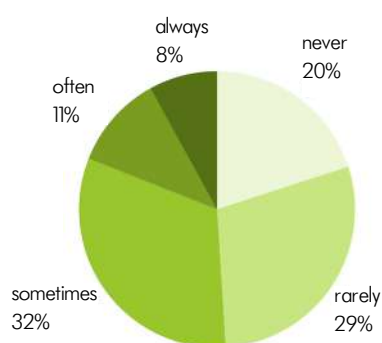


Figure 9
Source CMHA
HK Employee
Survey 2022;
CMHA HK
analysis

Employee turnover intention over the last 6 months

HK 2022, % of respondents by category, N=346

Senior staff, junior and senior management were most likely to sometimes consider leaving their employer (33-38%) while 20% of those at Director/C-Suite level often considered making the shift.

The most commonly cited reasons from employees considering leaving their employer were:

- **workload (45%)** - highest among junior staff and junior management
- **better career progression (43%)** - most commonly junior staff, junior management and Director/C-Suite
- **compensation (39%)** - highest among junior staff and junior management
- **lack of job recognition (39%)** - highest among junior and senior staff
- **difficult colleagues/manager (32%)** - highest among junior staff and senior management
- **working hours (32%)** - highest among junior staff and junior management
- **role ambiguity (32%)** high for senior staff and junior management
- **33% of junior staff cited mental health concerns.**

Employee ranking of workplace stressors; mental health problems, no mental health problems

HK 2022; % of respondents, N= 264

Employees who had experienced mental health problems in the last 12 months had a higher turnover intention than their colleagues with 34% sometimes considering leaving, 18% often, and 15% always thinking of leaving, as opposed to 27%, 6% and 1%. Both groups ranked better career progression, workload, compensation, working hours and role ambiguity highly when considering whether to continue with their current employer.

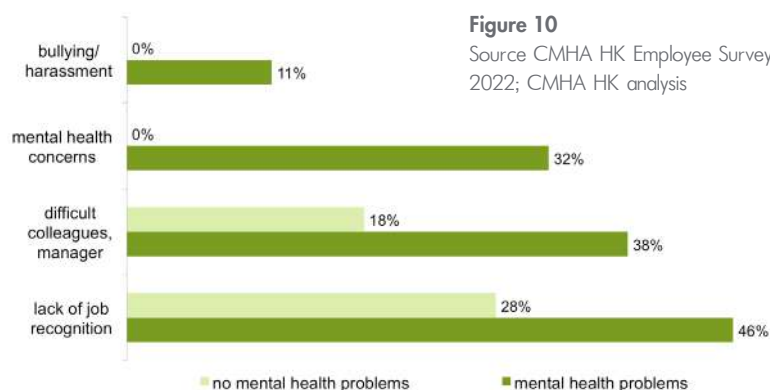


Figure 10
Source CMHA HK Employee Survey
2022; CMHA HK analysis

#2: Maintain workplace flexibility

The Covid pandemic accelerated the introduction of flexible workplace practices and for many professional service employees this provided significant improvements in work-life balance and personal wellbeing. While many Hong Kong employers are encouraging a return to office-based work, employees are keen to maintain a level of workplace flexibility they have become accustomed to.



81%

of employees are interested to work from home, higher among junior staff



48%

said their mental and physical wellbeing was significantly/ slightly better



43%

thought productivity was significantly/ slightly better

To explore how employees feel about workplace flexibility options, the 2022 survey included questions about a four-day week. Introducing a four-day week can be used by companies to give employees the opportunity to control their work time by providing flexibility in work hours and days to suit their personal and family needs. Employees were asked how a four-day week would impact their work hours, productivity and relationship with their employer.

- 85% are interested: 59% extremely, 26% quite
- interest is consistent across business functions, lower among junior management and at Director/C-suite level
- 56% expect to work longer hours during the four days
- 78% said it would improve company loyalty
- 51% said it would improve their productivity
- 85% anticipated improvement in their work-life balance
- 75% felt it would improve their mental wellbeing and level of stress.

When asked if they were willing to take a pay cut to achieve a four-day week, 41% of employees said they were unwilling to do so, while 29% were willing to take a 5% pay cut. When analysed by seniority, Directors, senior management and senior staff were more willing to take a reduction in pay with 15-19% willing to cut 20% of their pay to shift to a four-day week.

This is just one example of a workplace initiative employers can consider to give employees greater control over the time they allocate to their work commitments. The data shows while employees recognise the personal benefits of improved mental wellbeing and work-life balance, they also acknowledge benefits for employers such as increased employee productivity and company loyalty.

“ **‘KPIs remain the same. I don’t believe staff will slack at work, instead they will work harder and smarter to get things done to enjoy the incentive of one more day of rest.’** - Corporate legal junior management

‘I will be willing to take a pay cut in exchange for a four-day work week if workload is actually reduced. The percentage depends on the level of reduction of workload.’ - Back office, legal, assistant ”

#3: Improve communication with employees

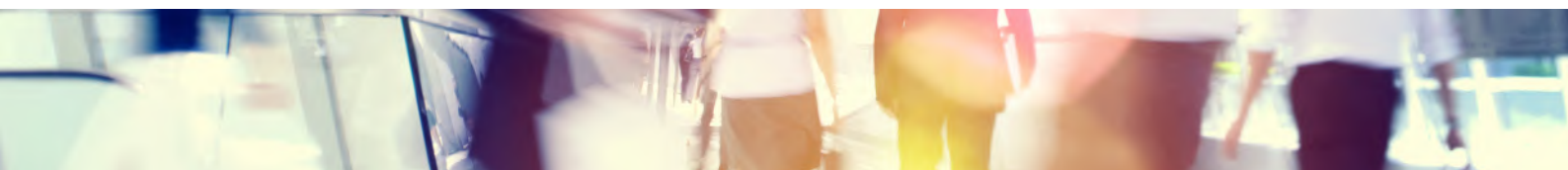
When asked about employer insurance cover, 43% of respondents were unaware of the services that were included in their employer medical insurance package and 38% were uncertain how to access these services. Awareness of the services provided by employers varied by seniority, with senior level staff more informed (Directors/C-Suite) and junior and admin staff least certain of the range of mental health resources available.

Promoting the use and process to access employer provided mental health services, as well as addressing employee confidentiality concerns for these services, would no doubt increase the uptake of services and ensure employees get the support they need. Employers can also consider the means of delivering services as our data has shown that across the general employee group preferences differ on how information and services are accessed.

CMHA HK recognises that many employers are investing time and resources into the development and delivery of mental health and wellbeing services. Ensuring employees are well informed of the resources available is an essential part of rolling out these mental health services.

“ **‘I am sure the service is there but I don’t know where or how to use it.’** - Back office, Insurance, assistant

‘People don’t share their mental health issues due to the stigma attached around it. If more senior leaders came out and shared their experiences, we can have different levels of the organisation come up to talk openly.’ - Anon, Insurance ”



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are very grateful to our member companies and individuals who took time from their busy schedules to participate in the mental health and wellness survey. Without their participation, this study would not have been possible. Many thanks also to Dr Zoë Fortune for her invaluable advice and input on the development of the survey in the process of producing this report.

City Mental Health Alliance Hong Kong (CMHA HK)

The City Mental Health Alliance Hong Kong (CMHA HK) is a not-for-profit membership organisation. We are an alliance of businesses, working together with mental health experts and partner organisations, to achieve our vision that every workplace will protect, support and create positive mental health for their people.

We provide training, events, resources, research and practical support for companies wishing to create mentally healthy workplaces. For more information, please visit cmhahk.org or contact us at info@cmhahk.org.

