HR Hurdles in 2022

your team’s guide to improving employee wellbeing
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However you have experienced the past 18 months of work, it’s very much your story. And it’s certainly not over yet.

We can’t yet know the full impact of a pandemic on the global workforce, but the picture is already incredibly complex - and still changing.

Broadly, on the positive side, we saw increased productivity. Some of us were able to work when we would normally be driving to the office or on the train. Some got to know colleagues better: those of us with desk jobs regularly allowed others into our kitchens as we worked.

Of course, if this was a positive experience - at least initially - this was a cultural gain. We know, however, that there are also cultural losses. And again, these would have been felt individually.

The lack of choice and control as we went in and out of lockdown affected some more than others. If you’re an extrovert, you may have found the lack of human contact difficult. If you thrive on predictability, you may also have struggled.

And that’s to say nothing of the more specific issues associated with mental or physical health. Many will have had intense and difficult times with relationship break-ups, illness or bereavement. Our own data showed significant increases in people presenting to us with anxiety, stress and depression over lockdown.

As with everything pandemic-related, the picture is still evolving - worryingly, we have seen an increase of almost 50% in those coming to us with suicidal thoughts, looking at Jan-June 2020 compared with Jan-June 2021.
For HR Directors and teams, supporting the mental health of their workforce looks set to become the defining challenge of our time. We know how much people have had to cope with so we shouldn’t be surprised if they bring this to work.

Where HR Directors and their teams have a huge role to play is in creating and championing a culture where staff are heard and listened to. This is something HR professionals are well-placed and more than capable of doing. Afterall, if we know what the issues are, we’re in a much better position to help, either personally or by offering access to specialist support.

What we should not lose sight of while discussing the role of HR teams is the team itself. HR professionals are acknowledged to have borne a significant emotional burden over the pandemic. Some have had to lay staff off, put others on furlough, deny requests for time off or implement pay cuts. Similar to many in the caring profession, those who look after our people within the workplace often put others’ needs before their own.

This has not been an easy time.

As we head to an uncertain future in the shadow of Covid-19, workforces across the world are understandably and to some extent in flux. Whatever the future holds, now is the time to get it right - to offer flexible, professional and individual support and protect the future wellbeing of employees across the country.

We hope that our clinical guidance in this guide around culture, wellbeing, psychologically-safe workplaces and self-care will help HR leaders and their teams to get in the best shape to tackle what’s to come.

Dr Lynne Green
Consultant Clinical Psychologist
and Chief Clinical Officer, Kooth
Redefining workplace culture after COVID-19
When COVID-19 hit, most people were forced to adapt to a new way of working, almost overnight.

For HR directors, this meant making some rapid changes to retain a productive workforce for what we all thought would be a matter of weeks.

Over half of the employed population started remote working, new temporary safety measures were introduced, methods of communicating were completely changed, and all of us were trying to make sense of the uncertain and alarming situation unfolding.

Fast forward to today and lots of the above still applies. The way of working has changed for good, and for many organisations, this has had a big impact on workplace culture.

We spoke with Lisa Kramer, Business Psychologist at Kooth, to discuss some of the cultural gains and losses, and to get her advice on how HR directors can retain the positive changes and redefine their culture.

Cultural Losses

Work and life balance
For many people, working remotely some or all of the time can make it difficult to form the necessary work and home boundaries.

Lisa Kramer: “We have become resilient in working from home, and actually sometimes performing better than we did in the office. Some people have become super productive and the pace has picked up. This has caused a work-life imbalance, with many people ‘living at work’, rather than ‘working from home’. There is a constant ‘on’, and the boundaries have become blurred for many - just because we can check our emails at 10pm at night, doesn’t mean we should. From an organisational perspective, this gives increased potential for burnout as people are being too conscientious and putting in too many hours. This can be useful for productivity, but not when it turns into burnout. It’s like a marathon - you can’t run at peak levels the whole time.”
Less standardisation for employees
Now that many people are hybrid working, there are issues for HR directors and managers around how to standardise practises for employees and ensure fair treatment.

Lisa Kramer: “If you have employees that are in the office everyday, they might be more likely to be considered for a promotion. Research suggests that seeing someone in person can help put them at the forefront of thinking and strengthen relationships. People working remotely might also be likely to miss out on off the cuff conversations and in-person chit chat, which is actually really important for strengthening bonds within teams. It can also help with an employee’s sense of belonging.

“There might also be staff who don’t want to come back into the workplace yet. Where do HR policies fit with this and what are the legalities around this? It’s all quite unclear. It’s also difficult to know how to manage meetings and day-to-day procedures when you’ve got half the team in the office and half at home.”

Training new employees
For the many people that have changed jobs during COVID-19, the training process might have looked different. For new starters, and especially young employees where they may have less experience in the workplace, there has been a lot of responsibility and pressure to find information or the contact they need. It has also been difficult for HR leaders to adapt their recruitment and training processes to ensure thorough training.

Lisa Kramer: “For those who are new to the workplace, there is a lot of responsibility to seek out the information they need. In the office, you pick up so much by hearing conversations, shadowing others, and integrating with the team. Online you simply don’t get this. If you’re an apprentice for instance, you need to be with others to learn the skills of your trade.”
Cultural Gains

As well as the clear losses, there have also been some surprising and significant gains.

Flexible working
Until very recently, an employee had to wait until they had spent 26 weeks in a company before they could ask to work flexibly, and these requests could only be made once a year. The Flexible Working Bill has recently changed, however, meaning that employees can now request this from day one. This is perhaps a reflection of our new understanding and trust in empowering staff to work flexibly; the pandemic showed us that home working and flexible arrangements can be made and that people perform to a high standard.

Lisa Kramer: “Hybrid and flexible working is now something that we are all entitled to. For employees, it allows consideration for individual circumstances and for some employers, it potentially gives them access to a more diverse and inclusive talent pool, as they can now recruit the best person for the role, irrespective of location or proximity to a central office.”

Increased resilience
Many organisations have been forced to adapt their approach, which has led to further innovation, new opportunities, and improved strategic resilience.

According to Apple CEO Tim Cook, the foundation of this is stronger, more hardy teams. A sense of “we are all in this together” has connected employees, and there has been more understanding, compassion, and adaptability from both employees and employers.

“We’re now more able to talk and support. We’ve been virtually going into people’s homes and that’s changed things. Some are coming back to work, some are coping at home. When those external stressors come back - the commute, office stresses - I expect there will be more issues.”

Sarah Tucker, HR Director, Equiteq
More understanding of mental health
COVID-19 has taken a heavy toll on wellbeing, with many of us experiencing isolation, loss, and changes in routine. Many more adults are experiencing mental health issues such as anxiety and depression since the beginning of the pandemic. The Kooth Pulse 2021 report highlights this, finding there was a 28% increase in adults feeling down, depressed, or hopeless everyday, and a 17% increase in suicidal or self-harm thoughts.

Lisa Kramer: “Mental health is finally being seen on a level with physical health. There is more understanding around what mental health is, how it can affect us, and how we are all susceptible to it. This can help to reduce stigma, which is really important. We can learn to address it in a different way and build a workplace culture that recognises and accounts for mental health.”

So much change has left HR leaders thinking about what they need to do to retain the positive culture changes. Now more than ever, people want compassionate, ethical and supportive employers, and evidence shows that people are not afraid to leave somewhere that doesn’t embody these things:

- Resignation rates are at an all time high and in one global study, Microsoft found that over 40% of employees were thinking about leaving their employer
- Job vacancies are also at a record high in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2021)
Lisa Kramer suggests there are a few things that employers can do to redefine their workplace culture:

**Embed mental health into every level of the organisation**

Employee wellbeing is one of the biggest drivers of productivity, engagement, retention, and success. With increased rates of mental ill health and 60% of HR directors reporting more demand for mental health support at work (Wellbeing at Work, 2021), employers need to find ways of prioritising wellbeing at every level.

Lisa Kramer: “Mental health needs to be ingrained into the culture of the values, and has to be considered in every decision making process. It’s about reducing workplace stressors, creating a non-judgmental environment, having compassionate and supportive leaders, and taking a flexible approach to individual circumstances. It needs to become the norm in standard practices across the company.”

This can be done by:

**Equipping leaders with training**

Line managers and leaders need the skills and confidence to have conversations around mental health, and to know when and where to signpost to.

Lisa suggests that it is not about asking people to be mental health experts, it’s about asking them to be compassionate leaders that aren’t afraid to talk about mental health:

“Line managers need skills in active listening and in approaching conversations in a non-judgemental way, as well as knowing what to do if they are concerned. Put mental health check-ins as part of one-to-ones, performance reviews, and general conversations. By asking ‘how are you really doing?’ and seeing that person in context, you get to know what else is going on in their life. You can then understand that person better and are then able to detect any changes in mental health or productivity.”
Provide necessary tools
When it comes to providing wellbeing support, make employees aware of what is available to them and offer different options for accessing support. For some people, this might be face-to-face therapy, for others, it might involve offering an anonymous, text-based service. It’s about making wellbeing support accessible to all, whether they are working in-person or remotely.

For some organisations where having conversations around mental health might be new, Wellness Action Plans (WAPs) are a great tool to help open up the dialogue around mental health. WAPs are personalised plans that can be used by all employees, whether they have a mental health problem or not. They help to understand what keeps an individual well at work, what might be an issue, and what to do if they are experiencing a problem. WAPs also allow for employees to take accountability for their own mental health.

Design or redesign policies and procedures around wellbeing
For work to have minimal impact on mental health, policies need to reflect employee wellbeing. This involves reducing workplace stress by giving manageable workloads and opportunities to feedback if this isn’t the case, allowing people to find an acceptable work/life balance (for example, relaxing rules around working hours and encouraging staff to take regular breaks), and offering flexibility to account for individual circumstances.

Effective communication
It’s all well and good having the above points in place, but ultimately it comes down to communication across the organisation.

Managers need to be clear in how they communicate with staff, ensuring they come across as open, understanding, and transparent in their expectations.

For people to feel comfortable, HR leaders also need to communicate to staff that the workplace is non-judgemental and safe. This comes down to how mental health is promoted, championed, and spoken about by senior leaders in the organisation.
Rethinking what is meant by “community”

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of community and social networking, and that it doesn’t have to (and shouldn’t) be limited to in-person meetings - which many employers have traditionally relied on to build culture and community.

We all have strong ties (people we are closely connected with and mix with frequently), and weak ties (acquaintances who you interact with fleetingly) within a community. According to research by Mark Granovetter (1973), a sociology professor at Stanford University, it is actually the weak ties we should be focusing on building at work. Having lots of casual acquaintances can help to improve our sense of belonging and introduce us to a more diverse range of information and ideas.

According to Lisa Kramer, companies need to focus on making opportunities for weak ties to flourish in this new way of working: “If you’re in the office, you bump into people at lunch, and you can make small talk with employees in different departments. All of these candid and fleeting interactions are actually integral to building community at work and generating a broader spectrum of ideas. We need to make spaces for these interactions to happen.”

Employees that are remote working tend to focus on mixing with their strong ties, the people that they work closely with and feel connected to already. While this is great for building a wide emotional support network, it can shut off opportunities to mix with a wider range of people.

It can be especially difficult for new starters, who may have few strong or weak ties in the workplace, to integrate into a team and feel connected, with research suggesting new employees have reported higher levels of loneliness during COVID-19.

It is down to HR to rethink the spaces where connections form. This might involve setting up a coffee morning (offline or in person) for employees, putting time aside before a meeting to have informal chats, or pairing current staff with new employees to help with training.

“100% what we’ve lost is that social element and the ability to have those watercooler discussions and those more in-depth thrashing out of issues.”

Sophie McAdams, HR Director, Digital Theatre
Listen and adapt

Workplace culture has to reflect employee wants and needs. HR teams need to invest time in listening to staff and reflecting employee voices throughout their redefinition of culture.

Lisa Kramer uses employee perks as an example: “If you chat to staff, they might no longer want meal or cinema vouchers as employee perks, because a lot of people are still hesitant to go out at the moment. Access to online digital mental health support, for example, might be more appropriate as an employee perk post-pandemic.”

Whilst COVID-19 may have initially brought panic to employers and employees, the experience of cultural losses and gains has served as an opportunity for HR leaders to consider and evaluate their workplace.

Many organisations are making vast and important changes to reflect new priorities. Redefining any part of workplace culture can take years to implement, and this experience has shown that these changes can happen quicker. That being said, now that we are moving forward and adapting to a completely new working world, take your time, let employees adapt and ensure that changes are fully thought through and realise that this is an iterative process.

Start with compassionate and open leadership, allowing space to try new approaches and giving employees room to work out and voice what feels right.

From here, you can start to build a stronger, more collaborative workforce, with employee wellbeing at the forefront.
"I feel like I’m starting a new job all over again"

“I got a new job at the beginning of the pandemic. Right away I went into remote working which was strange - and understandably took some time for the company to work out how to train me at a distance. Quite quickly I got used to working from home, and I got into a routine each day and I established relationships with colleagues remotely.

Now that we are going into the office on a part time basis, although lots of people seem happy about it, it’s actually made me feel really unsettled. Most of the team have met in person pre pandemic, and there are a lot of underlying connections and friendships that I didn’t realise when I was remote. It’s great that people get on well, but I have felt a bit left out and found it difficult to integrate - I’m meeting people for the first time and I feel like I’m starting a new job all over again. It’s knocked my confidence a bit. My role has also become more diverse since coming into the office. I’m taking on more responsibilities because I’m there in person and more involved in casual conversations, which has ultimately increased my workload compared to when I worked remotely. It’s been hard to adjust my time and pace to that.”
HR and wellbeing: How far should you go?
It’s thoroughly established that employee wellbeing is a predictor of better business performance. ‘Well’ employees are likely to lead to increased resilience, reduced absenteeism, higher engagement, and a more productive and communicative workforce.

It is the responsibility of HR directors to champion employee wellbeing and ingrain it into the culture of the workplace. This can happen through:

• Mitigating workplace stressors
• Designing policies that revolve around safety and wellbeing
• Creating an environment that is psychologically safe, where there is open communication and active promotion of wellbeing
• Enabling individuals to take accountability for their own wellbeing

Employee wellbeing has become a particular concern throughout the pandemic. Mental ill health rates are rising; the Office for National Statistics (2021) reports the number of adults diagnosed with depression has more than doubled since before the pandemic.

Many people have suffered loss, isolation, illness, and stress during this time, and while individual circumstances are outside the control of employers, the need for an understanding, compassionate, and flexible approach to work is more critical than ever.

For HR leaders, employee wellbeing is now not just important, but integral to adapting to new ways of working.

This has increased pressure on HR directors and managers to ‘get it right’. Many are finding it difficult to strike a balance between being supportive, adaptive, and advocating for wellbeing, without overstepping boundaries or taking on additional pressures.

“We asked Dr Hannah Wilson, Head of Clinical Governance and Clinical Psychology Lead at Kooth, for her tips on how far to go to support employee wellbeing, and what can be done to create an environment where mental health is championed.

“…”How do you build a work environment/working practices that are sustainably healthy? Immediately, how do you preserve/improve wellbeing when the boundaries between work and home have blurred beyond recognition and our people are exhausted?”

HRD of UK law firm
(anon)
Be aware of the boundaries

Know your limitations
As the person or team responsible for championing employee wellbeing, you may feel a rising pressure to know a lot about mental health or to have all the answers. However, there is no expectation for you to be a trained mental health professional overnight; it’s important to acknowledge your limitations when it comes to giving advice.

Dr Wilson: “It’s tricky because there is no definitive ‘line’. The boundary between what should be the responsibility of HR teams and what needs to be signposted out to a professional is blurred. It is, however, important for people to acknowledge their own limitations and knowledge. As an HR team member if you’re finding it tough to know what to say or how to have the conversation, consider signposting an employee to someone else in the team, who perhaps has mental health training, or to a mental health professional.”

A tough and personal conversation can be difficult. It is still, however, important to acknowledge someone is finding things difficult and to be transparent. Letting a member of staff know you want to get them the best support and that you will find someone more able to help is far better than offering advice if you are uncertain - which could, in some cases, be harmful.

According to Dr Wilson, “It’s far better to be upfront and supportive, checking in at a later date to ensure they got the necessary support.”
Know your responsibilities

As well as knowing when to signpost, think about when something is your responsibility as an employer, and when it’s not.

Dr Wilson: “It isn’t the job of HR or line managers to be doing a full mental health assessment. I’d be encouraging people to only ask about what is relevant to the role. For example, if I was managing someone who was a driver, and they were describing spells of feeling excessively sleepy or lightheaded (which can be symptoms of some mental health conditions), this would spark major safety concerns. So as you’re having conversations, think about how it might impact a staff member’s role or their fitness for work. It may be that you can make reasonable adjustments for them in the workplace, but it also may be that there needs to be a referral elsewhere, perhaps to their GP or to Occupational Health.”

Dr Wilson also suggests that we should not ignore that people have problems going on outside of work. “It’s more about being compassionate and empathetic, while keeping the focus around wellbeing in work.”

Establishing this boundary in your responsibility is vital for a number of reasons:

- It ensures your safety and the safety of employees. It prevents you from discussing problems outside of your knowledge or control. That being said, if someone shares information with you that shows they are at risk, it is important to escalate your concerns and suggest or signpost appropriate support.
- It allows you to look after your own wellbeing; listening to the worries of others can be overwhelming.
- It ensures you have the time and resources to carry out your responsibilities.
Create the right environment

Sense of safety
Ingraining mental health and psychological safety into your organisation’s overall culture may act as a preventative, and also help people seek support earlier on.

Dr Wilson: “As an employer I would be thinking about how to create a sense of safety so that people can raise issues if they choose to do so. It’s no reflection on an organisation or an HR team if people don’t want to bring every part of themselves to work. Your responsibility is about creating the conditions in which someone could share if they want or need to.

“To create a sense of safety and openness in the workplace, HR teams play an important role in making mental health part of the ongoing agenda and not just when there is a “mental health day”. It’s about talking about general wellbeing and making that part of everyday conversation in the workplace. It’s also about being transparent so that people understand what is likely to happen if they were to talk to their line manager about their mental health.

“Having clear communication around how staff are supported helps to set expectations. It’s about understanding that different things suit different people, and providing options. This may be offering flexible working hours for some; for others it might be offering anonymous text-based support. Others might prefer to talk face-to-face with a counsellor. In some cases, providing a work mentor may help.”

Normalising talk of mental health and regularly “checking in” with colleagues is one way to embed mental health into everyday life.

Dr Wilson maintains that you don’t have to wait until there is an obvious problem before opening a conversation. “Making it standard to ask people how they are (maybe even asking twice), makes space for people to talk, if they want to.”

In some organisations, “checking in” might be a straightforward process, but it may be more challenging in others. Having the goal of embedding mental health into everyday life at work is noble, but it’s about finding ways to do this that work for your organisation and industry.
Modelling the behaviour and language you want to see

People learn through watching others. It sets the scene for what is expected, and what is acceptable behaviour. This also applies to mental health and talking in the workplace; employees are much more likely to feel they can discuss wellbeing if they can see others around them doing the same.

Dr Wilson: “Be mindful as leaders how mental health and wellbeing are approached in the workplace and model the behaviour you want to see. Do you as a leader take a day off for your mental health? Do you voice when you’re struggling? If employees look around them and nobody is talking about mental health, they forget it’s an acceptable place to do so. It can feel like there is an expectation to work through anything. It’s also great to model behaviours that are supportive of wellbeing, such as taking a lunch break, and not responding to emails on days off.”

Reducing stigma around mental health

According to Dr Wilson, listening without judgement and being aware of language is key to setting the right tone for open conversation around mental wellbeing:

“I think people worry about being judged for speaking up, so as much as possible it’s about making sure any conversation around mental health isn’t judgemental. Language is key to communicating this to people. If you’ve got a workplace where it’s common to hear phrases like ‘that person is crazy’, or ‘I like my desk to be tidy because I’m a bit OCD’, or ‘man up!’ words like that can really impact people’s willingness to come forward.”

Having mental health at the forefront of workplace culture helps communicate to staff that they are in a supportive environment. This can encourage conversations around mental health at an earlier stage, rather than waiting until an issue has escalated or until a person is in crisis.

Employee wellbeing is paramount, especially in a world beset by COVID-19. Without engaged employees who feel supported, it is hard for a business to thrive. By being aware of your boundaries and creating a safe space for employees, the prospect of a mutually beneficial relationship where your responsibility to the company and your responsibility to individual employees are balanced.
“I just don’t feel safe anymore”

“I’m in a customer facing role and was classed as a ‘key worker’ in the beginning. When it all started, we took safety precautions really seriously, in full PPE and doing temperature checks every day. However, it has become more relaxed since then (for example, face masks are optional now and most don’t wear them), but I feel super nervous around health. I had coronavirus back in January and it was really awful. I’m so worried about catching it again or passing it onto my family and friends. I’ve also been asked to work in the other store in the same town, but this means getting the train, and I feel uncomfortable.

I don’t know how to share this with my team or boss because I don’t want to be judged or the reason why we all wear masks again, but I just don’t feel safe anymore. I never thought I’d be worried about my safety working in a supermarket, but since the pandemic, I feel so anxious at work.”
How to Manage Hybrid Working
Being an HR manager during the pandemic has definitely had its challenges. For much of the time, you may have been operating in crisis mode, working to equip the entire workforce from home, manage people’s stress, and develop different ways of working.

Now we’re in a new phase of hybrid working, where businesses are encouraging people to work some of the time at home and some of the time in the office.

Here, we explore how HR managers can help people make the most of hybrid working and manage fairly and inclusively in this new environment.

**No return to full-time work**

According to a BBC survey, almost all of 50 of the UK’s largest employers said that they didn’t plan to bring staff back to the office full time. Of these firms, 43 reported that they would support a mix of office and home working and would encourage staff to work from home two or three days a week.

It looks as though hybrid working is with us to stay. Some people think we may never go back to the old days, with commuters flocking to offices five days a week.

**Clashing priorities?**

It can seem as though businesses and workers have different priorities. Although some people can’t wait to get back to the buzz of the office, others have enjoyed working from home and are in no hurry to return.

As one HR Director told us: “For us, our offices are important to our culture and how we work both internally and with our clients, so we want people back in for more of the time. However, many employees want flexibility, autonomy and to avoid the commute.

“No, a big priority is establishing an approach to flexibility/agile working that meets our people’s - and future and prospective employees’ - expectations while keeping the office as a destination and preserving what’s good about our culture.”
Understanding the WFH side

It’s important to understand why people might want to spend less time in the office and more time working from home.

People may want to carry on working from home because:
• They have the chance to work more flexibly and fit their work around other interests or commitments
• They can commute from the kitchen to the living room, instead of struggling on public transport
• They have the opportunity to give more time to caring for children, parents, or other family members

Many people also have serious concerns about COVID-19, particularly those who are Clinically Extremely Vulnerable or living with someone who’s more susceptible to the disease.

The virus is still circulating, and it’s understandable when people want to avoid travelling on crowded transport or mixing with people in offices who may have a different approach to risk.

On a different note, we heard of one person in Scotland who’s dreading this winter, because their office has an open window policy and their desk is right next to the window. Yes, fresh air will be flowing into the room, but they might also need to wear a coat and bobble hat all day in order to stay warm.

The challenge of managing inclusively

New challenges are also springing up around managing inclusively, which have been highlighted in a recent study on hybrid working from the London School of Economics.

For example, managers may evaluate people based on whether they’re working at home or in the office, rather than on their talent or productivity. Staff may believe the grass is greener on the other side, whether they’re in or out of the office.

In particular, hybrid working can be difficult for new workers, who may have a hard time bonding with fellow workers or feeling part of the organisation if they only have occasional face-to-face contact.
5 ways to manage fairly and inclusively

Given the challenges of managing hybrid working, here are our top 5 tips.

1. **Create a sense of psychological safety**
   When people feel that they are in a place of psychological safety, they feel able to speak up about their concerns without it having a negative impact on their status or career. To do this, the safety and wellbeing of your employees needs to be at the heart of your policy and decision making, so it’s woven into every area of your business.

   In a hybrid working environment, you need to be comfortable talking to people about the overlap between their home and work life, and to make sure that they feel comfortable sharing their concerns with you, too.

   Encourage senior leaders to talk about challenges they may experience related to hybrid working, and make sure that staff have someone to talk to, whether that’s their manager, an HR representative, a Mental Health First Aider, or a Wellbeing Officer.

2. **Cultivate compassionate conversations**
   A key part of creating an atmosphere of psychological safety is enabling people to have compassionate conversations. You want people to feel able to be open about their struggles with hybrid working, whether they’re worried about the risks of returning to work or concerned they’re missing out by working from home.

   You may need to train your managers so they can facilitate compassionate conversations. Regular check-ins go a long way to making people feel cared for and included. You might ask questions like, “What’s made you feel good about your work this month?” or “Where would you like more support?”

   In some cases, people might also need to avoid coming across in a negative way. For example, rather than saying, “What a shame you can’t make that meeting”, you could say, “We’d love to hear your views on this. Is there another way you can share your thoughts?”. It’s about being adaptive, flexible, and inclusive.
Measure outputs not inputs
When people were working from home during the pandemic, managers were forced to rely more on measuring people's outputs than their inputs. We’ve realised that, as long as a project is delivered on time, it doesn’t matter whether an employee took time out in the middle of the day to exercise, meet up with a friend, or run an errand.

It all comes down to trust. Following the Leader-Member Exchange Theory, leaders who develop trust, liking, and mutual respect with their team members are more likely to improve the wellbeing and effectiveness of their employees.

Make meetings fair
If a group of people are gathered around an office table in real life and a couple of people are taking part online, the virtual participants are always going to be at a disadvantage. They’re less likely to be able to see everyone else clearly, hear what’s going on, or share their views.

The rule for meetings has to be: either everyone’s there in person, or you hold the meeting virtually.

Out of sight, not out of mind
How will you ensure that people who are working from home are not overlooked or sidelined when it comes to opportunities for training or promotion?

In the world of hybrid working, it’s more important than ever to ensure that you are using objective methods to evaluate people’s performance.

In a similar vein, check your biases to make sure that you’re not inadvertently favouring people you know well and rate highly.
“My priorities have changed since the pandemic”

“For me, working from home allowed me to have lots of flexibility, which as a parent, I really valued. I could do the school run at better times meaning my kids didn’t have to go to after school clubs. I could also get more done around the house, which meant that my wife or I didn’t have a huge amount of housework or cooking or ‘life admin’ to do at the end of our working days. I could kind of do it as the day went on, as a little screen break. I still got all my work done, and actually felt less stressed and more focused.

Coming back to the office, I have lost this flexibility and I’m worried about how this will impact my family. My priorities have changed since the pandemic - I want to spend more time with my family and doing things I love, and make my life less about work. It doesn’t mean I don’t want to work, I just want a lifestyle which can be flexible. Home working allows that and being in the office makes me feel that a flexible lifestyle is getting further away.”
For most of us, there is a whole different world outside work. We aren’t just people who show up, complete tasks, and live to do the same again tomorrow. We have hobbies, dependents, children, illnesses, financial stresses, relationship woes, and a host of other interests and issues that we may share with work or keep to ourselves.

Tom* is a sales manager and has been on furlough on and off over the last 18 months, during which he broke up with his long-term partner: “I was definitely ready to be back in work. My ex-girlfriend and I were both on furlough for months, which was intense and ultimately broke our relationship. It’s really hard being back at work, because no one talks about their personal lives much, but I need the structure and have enough friends outside work to get over it. I know I’m not 100% focused; I’m still getting over the break up. To be honest, though, I think we’ve all brought a few issues back to work with us, and it’ll be a while until we figure out how everyone really is.”

For HR teams, knowing how much of someone’s private life affects their working one can be tricky. If someone’s chronic illness is affecting their ability to perform at work, then that is clearly HR territory. Someone’s bird-watching weekend, however, is clearly not.

The impact of COVID-19 and lockdown has made this trickier still. People working remotely may have felt more remote in other ways. They may have lost the spontaneous work conversation, the chat by the kettle, or the regular team check in. This break in connection means that what lies outside working hours, whether impacting work or not, may be impossible to read. HR teams, therefore, are working at a distance from their staff; line managers are more remote; and issues are more likely to go undetected.

For Helen*, a tennis coach, her bereavement was something she chose to keep private: “My dad died just before lockdown, so I was already struggling before we all began working from home. I was quite relieved to have some space, to be honest. There is just me and my husband at home. In a funny way, I feel less connected to the office, because I did all my grieving away from my work colleagues. So, it feels like a lot has happened in the last year or so - which I didn’t want to share on Zoom. It definitely affected my performance, but I don’t think anyone noticed, particularly.”

According to Dr Hannah Wilson, head of clinical governance and clinical psychology lead at Kooth, lockdown may have led to fewer issues being shared: “We would always encourage people to talk to others, if they feel able. Sometimes, we can forget we have really good support networks, if we choose to use them. At the same time, it can be really tough to show your vulnerable side, especially at work. We also know that not everyone finds it easy to reach out or to form relationships where it feels safe to be vulnerable.”
Dr Wilson asserts that lockdown put a whole new layer of difficulty on top of those already-existing barriers, which may have made it even harder for some people to talk to others: “The risk here is that someone retreats into a private world that becomes increasingly difficult to reach. So, it is important for line managers to be watchful of any changes in mood or performance of staff and to check they’re okay, sometimes asking twice. It’s not about forcing people to talk about what’s going on for them; it’s just giving someone the opportunity to talk if they need to.”

Peter*, an experienced market researcher, found working from home opened up aspects of his work relationships that were hitherto private: “I definitely gave more of myself away over lockdown and the pandemic in general. Clients were seeing me more harassed than I would ever have been previously, as I was trying to juggle homeschooling and work. I was less able to control my work environment and separate it from home. My daughter wandered into a few Zoom meetings, which was, at times, incredibly stressful. Equally, I saw more of my clients, too, many of whom were struggling with lockdown or with illness. It seemed we were all finding it hard to separate work from home.”

Given the huge disparity in experience, how can HR professionals assess and individualise what support is likely to be needed?

Dr Wilson: “The massive disruption of COVID-19 will have been traumatic for many, in ways that we may only be starting to fully understand. There are those whose lives have been changed forever through grief and loss. Those who feel unable to return to the office because of severe health anxiety. Others who may not yet have processed the past few months. For HR teams welcoming staff back to work, or seeing a slower trickle of returning employees, this is a huge challenge. It’s likely there are many ways in which their staff’s experiences may have affected them, some of which may only begin to manifest as people return to the workplace. It will also be very individual in terms of how people respond and adapt.”

The question for HR directors and their teams is how to be prepared. How to recognise everything outside the “9-to-5” that may affect performance within it. How to know which workers are in most need, and which type of support is most appropriate.

Dr Wilson believes that although this is a complex area, the foundation is a simple one: “It’s really all about creating safety so that people can share that they’re struggling. It’s important that people feel they have a choice about whether or not to raise an issue. And, if they do, for organisations to listen in a non-judgmental way - and to be able to offer a range of options.”
Part of creating that feeling of safety and trust at work is in building an open culture - for all levels of the organisation to be encouraging conversation and, where possible, sharing their experiences to show others that they can feel safe in doing the same.

Language is one area Wilson believes we could think about more: “Language is important, here, in terms of how we talk about mental health and wellbeing. Loosely talking about ‘being OCD’, for instance, when tidying your desk is not accurate and may be unhelpful for someone living with this condition. Talking about working being ‘mental’ may well offend someone experiencing mental health distress. Then there are phrases like ‘man up’, which can be damaging to people who feel they can’t discuss an issue openly without compromising society’s ideas around gender.”

Creating and modelling an open culture means that conversations are more likely to happen, and that we are more likely to learn about people’s experiences outside work and offer support where needed. Listening to how an issue is impacting someone’s ability to work, rather than judging them for it, is imperative.

The key for HR teams is to be aware, ready, and able to offer the right support when inevitable conversations need to be had around mental health. HR leaders know there’s a lot going on outside working hours, good and bad. Celebrating the good is great. Making it easy to discuss the bad and get effective support is critical.

*Pseudonyms used to protect anonymity*
Supporting people in the shadow of COVID
Remember how September used to be? People might have come back from holiday, refreshed and reinvigorated, ready for the challenges of autumn. They may have signed up for a new course to expand their horizons. Or perhaps they’d just have stocked up on some shiny stationery to celebrate that “new term” feeling.

It’s different this time

The return to work in September 2021 feels very different. Few people have had the kind of holiday they might normally enjoy, and we’re still living in the shadow of the pandemic.

Add new hybrid ways of working into the mix and, as a manager, you have a real challenge on your hands. How do you support people who may be struggling to hold their lives together?

Lisa Kramer, a business psychologist at Kooth, shares her thoughts and tips.

What issues might people be bringing back to work this autumn?

First of all, we know that during COVID-19, many people – such as hospital and care home staff, and cashiers – have carried on in the same workplace throughout the pandemic. Here, we’re talking about employees who are returning to the office for the first time.

Among that group of people, some employees will come back to work with Long COVID, some may have suffered bereavement, and others will be experiencing anxiety about their health. They might feel less of a desire to be in the workplace. Also, if they’ve been working remotely for over a year, they may have less of a sense of belonging to their team and to the organisation.
How has the pandemic affected people’s mental health?

Our latest Kooth Pulse Report has some interesting figures on this. It revealed an 89% increase in adults coming to Kooth for mental health support in 2020, with 39% saying they felt down, depressed, or hopeless nearly every day. That’s a rise of 28% compared with 2019.

It doesn’t end there. During the pandemic, anonymous data from the Kooth platform on working age adults reported that:

• Both sadness and sleep difficulties increased during 2020. In November 2020, sleep difficulties were 106% more prevalent than in 2019
• Suicidal thoughts increased during 2020. In February 2021, 27% of all adults presenting with mental health issues displayed thoughts of suicide
• Self-harm issues have been rising among adults and have been worse than the previous year in every month since August 2020

How are these issues likely to manifest themselves at work?

If people are carrying an extra mental health burden around with them, this increases their cognitive load – the amount of effort they have to use while reasoning and thinking.

In turn, this reduces how well they can function, and can manifest itself in poorer or lower performance, until they are able to unburden themselves and refocus. Mental health issues can act as “interference” on people’s levels of productivity.

What effect will it have if managers don’t offer support?

There are two issues here: a lack of COVID-related support and a lack of mental health support.

If an organisation doesn’t have a “Return to Work” policy, employees could feel fearful and resentful. They might only feel safe if, for example, there’s a hand-washing policy, windows are open, and working hours are staggered.

If an organisation doesn’t offer its staff mental health support, employees could carry on performing suboptimally, leading to a downwards spiral. This can create resentment among other colleagues who have to pick up the slack, leading to low productivity and a toxic work environment. If this becomes a company-wide issue, it’s hard for managers to recover productivity and morale without putting in place a wellbeing or culture change programme.

These are serious risks, so it’s important for organisations to:

• Offer support to employees early
• Invest in a mental health support service like Kooth
• Encourage people to use the support that’s available
What are the practical steps that managers and HR teams can take?

Here’s what I’d recommend:
1. Be very clear about the help that’s on offer and how to access it.
2. Reduce the stigma of mental health issues by supporting “it’s okay not to be okay” campaigns.
3. Get support from senior, high-profile staff members who will act as advocates for supporting mental health issues.
4. Consider including evaluations of mental health as part of performance management KPIs.
5. Train line managers to listen non-judgmentally. You’re not training them to be a counsellor, just to listen without judgement.
6. Train managers so they know how to signpost colleagues to access help.
7. Build a culture of support among colleagues.
8. Consider training people in your organisation as Mental Health First Aiders

To what extent do HR teams need to take more account of people’s “whole lives”, rather than simply their “work lives”?

We have (finally) realised that people come into work “in context”. What does that mean? It means that I’m Lisa, married, with two teenage children, elderly parents, and a sick nephew, etc. This shows the stresses and strains that I have as I come into work.

In the last year, this “contextualising” has become very pronounced, as there has been little separation between work life and home life. So, organisations need to take account of people’s “whole lives”, and policies and procedures should match this, too.

An HR policy should allow for flexibility and, for example, let a parent go to a sports day and make up the time later. It’s about trusting your staff to do the work and judging people on the quality of their work, not by how much time they’ve sat at their desk.
“How will my job fare through it, and will there still be many opportunities to develop?”

“There have been so many unexpected turns to the past year or so, and I wouldn’t be surprised if we are still impacted by coronavirus for years to come. I’m quite worried about how my job will fare through all of it, and whether there will still be as many opportunities to develop as I initially thought. I’m very grateful to be in a good company and great role, but it hasn’t been the experience I initially thought for when I joined the company after university. It’s, understandably, been a lot about surviving the pandemic, but there haven’t been many chances for me to grow in skills and experience like I hoped for. That being said, I feel lucky to have my job, as lots of people have been let go of. I’m scared of that too, it all seems pretty unstable and I’m unsure of the vision moving forward.”
Creating a psychologically safe workplace
Ensuring safety in the workplace is nothing new for HR leaders. From physical safety to cyber security, from training to policy development, safety plays a big part in ensuring the protection, welfare, and ultimate success of the team.

In the last decade, a lot of emphasis has been placed on psychological safety - the belief between employees that they can share ideas, concerns, and questions without fear of judgement or repercussions from others - including management.

Having such an environment is the foundation of genuine employee wellbeing, an integral part of any organisation. It’s no longer just about staff perks, wellness days, and free fruit in the office - it’s about creating a space where employees feel safe, can comfortably be themselves, and know that their voice is valued.

According to Abraham Maslow, psychologist and philosopher best known for his Hierarchy of Needs model, it is only once we feel secure in an environment that we can establish meaningful connections with others, grow in self-esteem, and reach our true creative potential.

It is therefore no wonder that forward-thinking companies who create psychologically safe environments report that their teams are:

- More diverse and inclusive
- Sharing a broader spectrum of ideas
- Clearer on overall goals
- More likely to take risks and trust one another

These effects then filter into the overall success of the business. For multinational tech giant Google, a psychologically safe culture fostered increased productivity and innovation, quicker adaptability to change, and better problem solving - factors which are even more valuable in the climate of COVID-19.
Creating a Safe Space

Developing a psychologically safe culture starts with HR leaders and managers. We have put together some ideas on how to cultivate this environment with insight from Alexandra, Head of People at Kooth.

Lead with Curiosity

When it comes to any kind of management or team building, taking a curious approach is one way to stop looking at situations with blame or judgement and create a space where employees feel heard.

Alexandra says: “Approaching situations with curiosity is so important in creating a safe space to explore circumstances. I was in a situation, once, where one of my employees was demonstrating poor performance and was consistently late, and I already thought, ‘This guy can’t last’. But adopting a curious approach from training, we approached this situation with ‘What’s going on for you?’, and you could just see his relief. He was a carer, and was travelling long distances back and forth, and he couldn’t make the timing work. He felt he was failing at work and as a carer. By creating a space where we could have that openness of conversation, we were able to make adjustments so that he could keep the job that he needed.

“In terms of approaching situations, without sounding cliché, the ‘whole-person’ thinking is important. What’s under the surface for this person? Be genuine, authentic, and empathetic, and make space to talk.”

Approaching with curiosity helps to reduce the “threat” that some people can feel in the workplace. Additionally, listening to employees and investigating their situation demonstrates interest in them as a person, which can help people feel more appreciated for their whole selves - not just their work.

Training up leaders to have these conversations is also necessary, according to Alexandra: “You don’t just suddenly ‘know’ how to have these conversations. It’s a skill that takes time and grows like a muscle. Training on taking a curious approach is something that should be embedded into all front line management teams.”
Think SCARF

Alexandra also spoke about the importance of using the SCARF brain-based model to communicate with others in a safe way. This stands for five domains that impact behaviour in social situations:

- **Status**: Our relative importance to others
- **Certainty**: Our ability to predict the future
- **Autonomy**: Our sense of control over events
- **Relatedness**: How safe we feel with others
- **Fairness**: How we perceive exchanges between people to be

According to neuroscience research, these social domains activate the same threat response in the brain that we developed for survival. This means that when we feel threatened in one of these domains, we can have strong emotional and instinctive reactions, to protect ourselves from harm or risk.

For example, if you are left out of important conversations at work, you may feel a sense of threat to your fairness or autonomy. Studies show that such situations activate similar brain regions as to when we are in physical danger.

The SCARF model can be used to create a safe environment where threats are minimised, rewards are maximised, and communication is clear and effective. For example:

- Minimise threats to autonomy by avoiding micromanaging, and instead maximise rewards by handing out responsibilities and the freedom to explore
- Minimise threats to certainty by avoiding vague direction, and instead be clear and transparent about goals, expectations, and feedback

How you use the SCARF model depends on the individuals in your team, and everyone responds to situations differently. For more information and research on the SCARF model and how to use it, see [here](#).
Prioritise Connections Over Productivity

According to research, a positive team climate is by far the number one predictor of psychological safety. Without good interpersonal relationships, it is difficult to form trust - and without trust, people do not feel safe sharing ideas, concerns, and questions.

To develop a positive team climate and also reduce stress levels, Alexandra suggests approaching each meeting with joy: “I like to start meetings by each of us sharing a moment of joy from our day. People tend to come into meetings with high stress levels, either from being very busy or even from battling traffic in the mornings, and it’s difficult to think clearly when you’re stressed. Taking five minutes at the beginning of each meeting to talk about something lighthearted reduces those stress hormones, meaning we have more effective conversations. When you want to stretch and challenge, you can because people are less on edge.

“You also get to learn little unusual things about each person, which is important for good relationships, especially in a remote environment. Leaders taking five minutes at the start to talk about non-work related stuff and connect with the team models that it’s okay to take time to connect with others, and that there is a good reason to do it.”
Be Approachable

Being approachable relates to both how reachable someone is and also how open and welcoming they are.

Leaders can increase how accessible they are by doing the following:

- Operating an open door policy
- Providing different ways of receiving ideas and feedback, acknowledging that not everyone works in the same way
- Organising regular team meetings
- Modelling vulnerability - from admitting to mistakes, to showing emotions, to asking for support and feedback, leaders who make themselves vulnerable show their employees that they are human, too, helping their overall approachability and warmness. It also shows staff that they are not expected to be perfect, and that they are in an environment where learning and growth is encouraged, rather than punishment.
- Actively listening to others
- Always offer the benefit of doubt

All of the above put staff at ease when communicating with leaders, and they create a space where listening, openness, and empathy are the norm. These are integral traits to a workplace that has the wellbeing of employees at heart.

Creating a psychologically safe workplace will ultimately vary depending on the company and industry you are in, but at the forefront of this culture is a space of acceptance, where people feel comfortable to be themselves, raise questions, and have space to learn.

Psychological safety is the new driver of employee wellbeing and business success, leading to healthier, happier, and more inclusive teams, where there is a sense of engagement, increased motivation, and better performance.
Coping with multiple resignations
“I was tired of being overworked and underappreciated, so I left my job. We’ve all been through so much, and things needed to change to reflect that.”

Now, more than ever, there are employees like Harry* - a marketing assistant from London - who are thinking of leaving or have left their job. Dubbed as the “Great Resignation” by some, 2021 has shown record highs in employee departures and job vacancies.

From dissatisfaction with working arrangements, a shift in priorities, and pursuing a passion reignited during lockdown, there are many reasons why many people are embarking on something new during this time.

But where does this leave the existing members of the workforce?

According to Dr Lynne Green, Chief Clinical Officer and Consultant Clinical Psychologist at Kooth, “Research shows that when companies are involved in laying people off, or lots of people choose to leave, there tends to be really negative spillover effects for those who remain employed. People may show lower levels of wider organisational commitment and job satisfaction, as well as greater stress levels...it’s HR teams who bear the brunt of this.”

Contagious discontentment

According to a study due to be published in the next edition of Leadership & Organisational Development Journal, the quitting behaviour of 2021 salespeople was dependent on two factors: the employee’s relationship with their line manager, and who else leaves.

If employees start to see others resign, they begin to question whether they should be job hunting as well, and leaving becomes a more viable option. Employees may also start to ruminate and discuss why people are leaving the workforce, prompting thought around the negative parts of the organisation that may have played a part.

Ultimately, this is a catalyst for reduced trust in the company and an increased inclination to look elsewhere.
Increased stress or workload

Those left to pick up the pieces may have to take on additional responsibilities and projects or adjust their role and workload to counteract the loss of staff members.

While this may be temporary, it might lead to further stress and pressure on employees, increasing the likelihood of burnout. Considering that the resignation of other staff is normally out of control of current employees, some also may find this increased workload unreasonable.

Change in work environment

Key members of staff and well-liked people leaving can have a lasting impact on the dynamic of a team and the relationships between colleagues, for better or worse. This can even lead to a change in company culture and how satisfied people are overall at work.

Collectively, lots of people leaving can impact how others feel at work and dampen overall team morale, which may have drastic effects on productivity, wellbeing, and communication.

So, how can HR leaders look after existing employees?

Ultimately, it’s about creating an inclusive and appreciative workplace that employees don’t want to leave in the first place. It needs to be psychologically safe, providing autonomy, trust, and opportunities. You can read about how to do this in our other articles in this Kooth Work Handbook.

But HR teams can do all the right things, and people will still leave. There are a whole host of reasons people move on, and it’s not always a reflection of the working environment.

Communication is key

Being open and honest about people resigning is key - there is nothing worse for employees than secrecy and uncertainty. Acknowledge people are leaving, let employees know that you are supporting them, and assure them that you are there to listen to their worries and concerns.

Jemima*, a counsellor for Kooth, says, “Ensuring you have a work environment where your staff can be open and honest about how they feel can help people feel heard and validated when things are tricky - whether this is through an open door policy, regular one-to-one check ins, or staff meetings where general wellbeing and upcoming changes are discussed.”

Be mindful about how employees leaving are spoken about throughout the company, and model the response that you want to see. Showing panic and distress trickles through all levels of the team and will be mirrored by employees. Be upfront about the challenges, but be positive and hopeful.
Be flexible
Many employees might be worried about an increase in workload, a shift in priorities, or having to take on a new role. HR teams and team leaders must be flexible and adaptive in their approach and may have to shift around projects and deadlines to ensure staff do not get overloaded.

Depending on who leaves, leaders may also have to change long-term visions and goals for their team to reflect new priorities or expectations. Being adaptive and resilient to change is a key driver of team success through adverse conditions, according to research from John Hopkins University.

Remain appreciative
Showing gratitude to staff for the work they are doing and the additional work they are taking on is necessary during this time. Celebrating achievements and providing encouragement helps employees feel valued and gives more meaning and commitment to their work.

Jemima reflects on one of her experiences:

“I worked for a company, once, where lots of people left during a small time frame. My director responded by rewarding the team we had left. He took all of us out for breakfast every Monday, because workload was higher and we were all taking on so much more. The whole experience ended up being really positive. Essentially, we had to arrive early for breakfast, so it was also a way of getting us in earlier - but because he gave a gesture of something so simple and was really appreciative, we worked our socks off and all bonded as a team, too.”

People may also begin to feel isolated if someone with whom they worked closely leaves. Consider creating teambuilding or socialising opportunities for people to connect with each other and build genuine connections.

Support leaders
Make sure team leaders are equipped to face the challenges that come with employees leaving. Whether it be additional training around compassionate leadership or a change in targets and goals to reflect the new workforce, leaders need adequate resources and support.

Retaining employees is a challenge for every HR team, and the current climate poses more risks and threats to account for. By taking steps to look after the remaining employees, you can not only reduce the risk of more people leaving, but build a resilient and even stronger workforce.
What about you?
When we began the mass migration home during the first lockdown, it was human resources teams who we relied on to manage this process. It was HR departments we called on when we wondered how we were going to continue with our jobs from home, or work while homeschooling our children. They were the teams we expected to know the latest government guidance; they were the ones who explained to us what it meant and how it applied to us.

It might be easy to forget just how heavy an emotional burden HR teams have carried over the last 18 months. In the thick of lockdown, HR departments were scrambling: restructuring businesses, bolstering wellbeing plans, furloughing employees, laying off staff, administering pay cuts - all while supporting staff, many of whom were ill or struggling.

It’s also easy to overlook the fact that HRs are continuing to work at the sharp end of fundamental shifts in working patterns, recruitment, and staff support.

It’s no wonder, then, that many are frazzled. According to Sarah Tucker, HR Director at Equiteq, “I know from people in my networks that HR teams are tired. Businesses dealing with ever-changing regulation around COVID-19 turned to HR teams - who themselves were learning what to advise and what to do with, for example, rules around furlough. There’s definitely a continuing emotional pressure on HR teams.”

This continuing pressure lies across a number of issues at the top of HR teams’ priority lists. These may include big topics like wellbeing, flexible working, culture, recruitment, retention, and development.

“I know from people in my networks that HR teams are tired. Businesses dealing with ever changing regulation around Covid turned to HR teams - who themselves were learning what to advise and what to do, for example with rules around furlough. We didn’t always have the answers. There’s definitely an emotional pressure on HR teams.”

Sarah Tucker, HR Director, Equiteq
The HR Director of a UK law firm is only too aware of the impact of the pandemic on her team and of what’s to come: “We’ve certainly been thrown some enormous challenges in the last 18 months. Our team has been working incredibly hard over a sustained period, dealing with things we’ve never come across before, and we know that HR people often absorb an emotional burden in a business. For us, these challenges aren’t over. Issues around hybrid working and culture are currently top of mind - as is the obvious exhaustion of our team.”

According to Dr Lynne Green, chief clinical officer at Kooth, exhausted HR teams need to prioritise their own wellbeing to best help others: “It’s not uncommon for those who work in helping professions - I’m thinking doctors, teachers, carers, those in HR - to put other people’s needs before their own. It’s common among parents, too. But, really, if you’re not looking after yourself adequately, you are less likely to do a good job of looking after others.”

This can sometimes be difficult to achieve, as Dr Green attests: “I remember being in an office years ago and feeling flu-ey and ill. I was coughing and sneezing, but being really stoic and thinking: I’m not going home, I need to work and set an example. Then somebody said, ‘We don’t want your germs! Go home!’ I then realised my mistake, and I went home. It’s easy to forget or dismiss our own needs, but it’s so crucial.”

“I think most HR teams will be exhausted! I was in a call today where someone (not an HR person) called HR teams the “workplace emergency service of the pandemic”, which isn’t entirely true but we’ve certainly been thrown some enormous challenges in the last 18 months!”

HRD of UK law firm (anon)
Looking after yourself could be as simple as recognising when you’re ill and need time off - and actually taking that time, rather than limping along. It’s also sharing stresses and your emotional burden with your line manager, colleagues, or friends and family so that you aren’t coping alone. It also means creating a firmer line between work and home, so that you’re not checking work emails outside working hours or working on your days off. For some, it will be about self-care, so that they will take a walk in their lunch hour, do some yoga, or read a book.

Sophie McAdam-Clark, HR Director at Digital Theatre, explains her philosophy behind wellbeing: “For me, it’s about realising that you can’t pour from an empty cup. So, if I feel like I need a break, I’ll take one. I will listen to myself. And that comes from having a CEO who would understand that - as long as I’m upfront and honest. Our business is quite open about emotions and stress, so I feel enabled to prioritise my wellbeing.”

As HR teams will know only too well, behaviour modelled by senior leaders trickles down across an organisation. So, hearing and seeing your managers take time off, take a break, and discuss their own wellbeing can be the best way to encourage others to do the same. Feeling safe to do so in a way that won’t be negatively judged is critical. In this way, issues can be discussed as they emerge and not left to escalate only to be dealt with as a more serious issue or mental health crisis later down the line.

Dr Green says: “The majority of mental health conditions start off small and get bigger if left untreated. I don’t just mean treated in the professional sense; often, the early steps to feeling better are things like talking about how you’re feeling, feeling heard, and feeling like you’re not on your own. And the more we have these conversations, the more normal they become. It becomes easier for people to say they’re not coping.

“Anyone can initiate these conversations; however, we sometimes feel anxious about this and worried that we may offend somebody. Maybe it doesn’t feel appropriate within the workplace. But often, talking about these difficulties results in other people admitting that they’re feeling the same or have also been struggling. That, in itself, can be really mutually beneficial and normalising. If people know what the issues are, then they’re in a much better position to help.”
“I definitely feel less secure about my job now. I work in hospitality and spent months over the last year and a half on furlough. It’s good being back at work, but I definitely feel less secure about my job now. I know I came close to being let go. The business hasn’t done that well, so we’re all under pressure to bring in sales and, in effect, save our jobs. I try not to worry about it too much. I would say my mental health wasn’t great over lockdown - at times I was really happy in the garden and finding jobs round the house to do. But my girlfriend was also put on furlough so we just got under each other’s feet in the end. We split up, which was hard. I’m trying to be optimistic and not worry about Covid or my job too much. In an ideal world, it would be good to have someone to talk to when things feel a bit dark.”
Helping you create a healthier, happier and mentally well workplace

Kooth Work is the mental health platform supporting your employees through counselling, self-help resources and forums.

Data that helps you help them.
As a business, you will receive aggregated reports and insights that will help maintain a happier and more productive workforce.

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