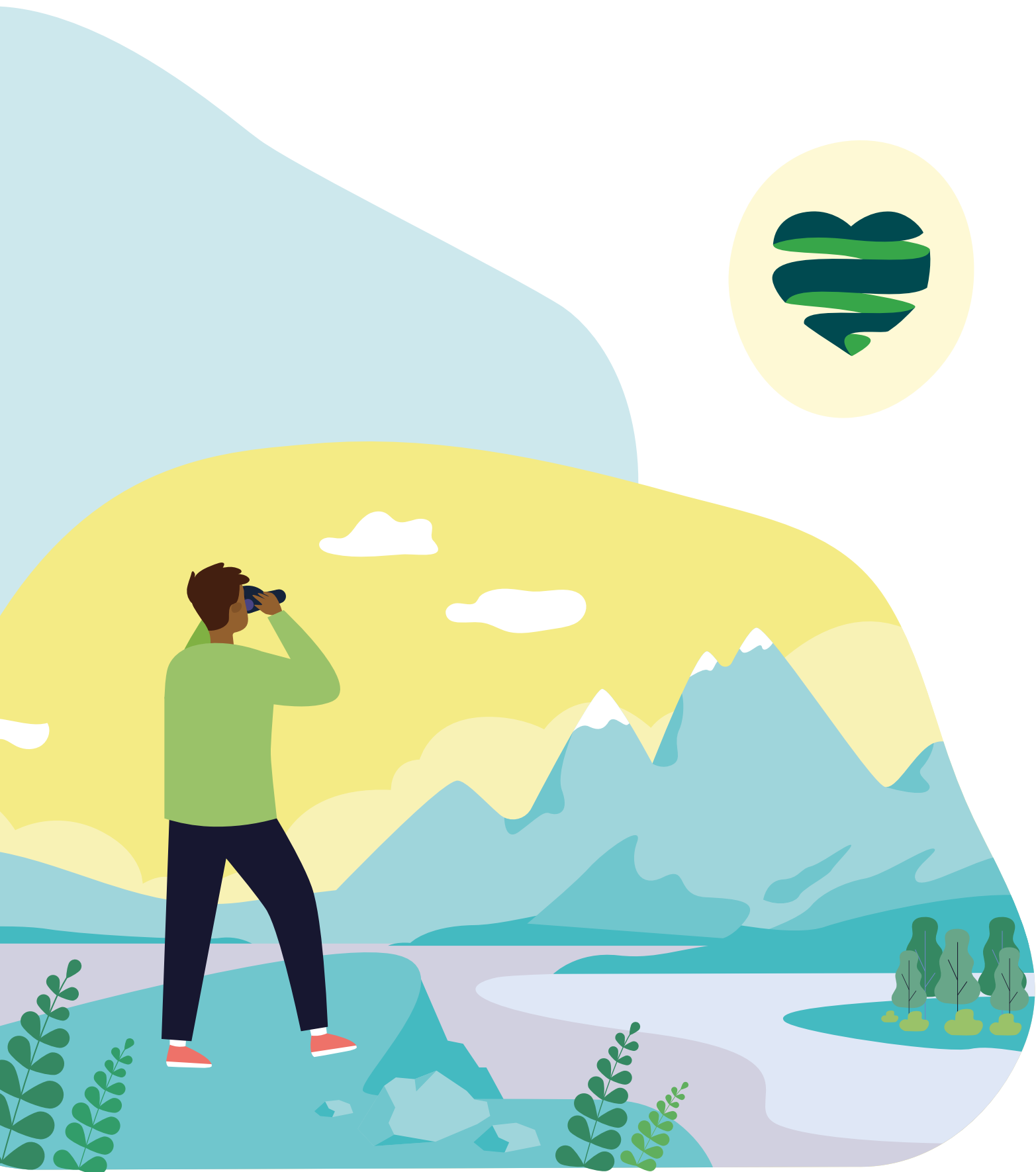


# Keeping up Appearances:

How Pleasanteeism is Eroding Resilience





# Foreword

**Lime Global Limited**  
**CEO & Founder, Shaun Williams:**

**Resilience; the ability to spring back or recover quickly from difficulty. Unsurprisingly, this is the word on many people's lips as we begin the long road to recovery from a global pandemic that has cost so much to so many.**

Our capacity for resilience is influenced by many different factors, but mental health is particularly closely correlated. We hear almost daily that many of the long-term repercussions of this pandemic are likely to be felt in terms of poor mental health. Behind closed doors, through lockdowns and months of uncertainty, it is no surprise that many have seen their mental health and resilience decline over the last 18 months. And although restrictions are now easing, it is clear that COVID-19 is here for the long haul, resulting in yet more uncertainty about the nature and scale of challenges ahead.

**This begs the question – how well can we as individuals and, together, as businesses successfully bounce back?**

At Lime we are passionate about helping as many people as possible stay healthy for as long as possible by providing super-simple affordable top-ups to public healthcare. This is our purpose and we live and breathe it. We want to do what we can to support people's mental health and strengthen their resilience, particularly among small and medium businesses which make up more than 99% of businesses in the UK, and many of whom are struggling to operate in a dramatically changed marketplace.

The first step is to understand what's happening to people's mental health and what impact this is having on resilience in the workplace. This is why we have commissioned our 'Keeping up Appearances' research into UK workers and assembled our panel of leading mental health experts.\*

The findings revealed a clear truth. Despite many people suffering behind the scenes, too many UK workers feel they have to hide their true selves or conceal their anxieties by putting on a brave face at work. We've called this phenomenon 'workplace pleasanteeism' – and in this report we explore the impact that this 'brave face culture' has on mental health, personal resilience, and productivity.

Our report not only explores this 'pleasanteeism' phenomenon but more crucially, it reveals tips and advice for employers that can be easily implemented to help them support employees to be as happy and healthy as possible. How? By fostering a culture that promotes an open narrative around mental health, and in turn, nurtures greater resilience. So, let's start now.



<sup>1</sup> [House of Commons Briefing Library](#)

# Executive Summary

**This report was commissioned to examine the mental health of UK workers and the impact that it is having on resilience in the workplace.**

The research draws attention to the fact that countless are suffering from deteriorating mental health, with the COVID-19 pandemic leaving many feeling less resilient than ever before. It revealed that a quarter (26%) of people are struggling to cope at work, while just over a third (34%) feel the same way about everyday life,\* yet a large number feel they have to hide their true selves or conceal their anxieties by putting on a brave face at work.



This brave face culture, coined “workplace pleasanteism” is having a negative impact on mental health, personal resilience, and productivity. However, much can be done to tackle this challenging phenomenon, and employers have a range of easy and affordable options to enable staff to be their best, most true selves at work.

The recommendations – following research based on a survey of 2,132 UK workers and expertise from a panel of leading mental health experts – for improving mental health and resilience in the workplace includes a series of simple steps that small businesses can take, ranging from informal, procedural and technical approaches.

\*This finding combines respondents who said 'Strongly agree' or 'Somewhat agree'.

## The UK's brave face workplace culture

Resilience: the ability to bounce back in the face of adversity or challenge – something that is vital in times of struggle or difficulty. The COVID-19 pandemic has left many people feeling less resilient than ever before, with **26% admitting that they are struggling to cope at work, while 34% feel the same way about everyday life.\***

From health and wellbeing to money and security, many of us are feeling more vulnerable than we were 18 months ago, which has had a knock-on effect on our financial, emotional, physical and mental resilience.

Mental health forms a crucial part of resilience and vice versa. However, pleasanteeism – the pressure felt by many to put on a brave face – is undermining important efforts to promote an open dialogue about mental health in the workplace. At the same time, the stress of keeping up appearances in front of colleagues is negatively impacting people's mental wellbeing and resilience.



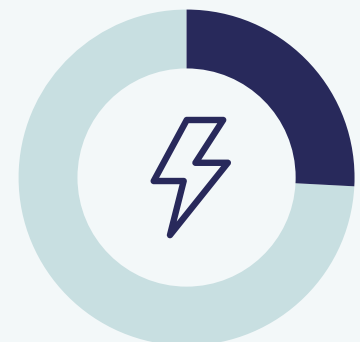
Similar to the concept of 'presenteeism' – the reduced productivity often seen when employees go to work despite being unwell or feel under pressure to always be working – pleasanteeism also has the potential to have a significant impact on the bottom-line for many businesses. In fact, 'presenteeism' reportedly costs UK businesses twice as much money

as absence and sick days due to lost productivity, which begs an important question – what is the true cost of pleasanteeism for UK businesses?

Employers have a responsibility to enable staff to be their best and most true selves at work. Not only will it increase resilience and productivity, more importantly it's simply the right thing to do. And the sooner we can start, the better.



**26%**  
agree that they are  
**struggling to cope  
at work**, while 34%  
feel the same way  
about everyday life.\*



<sup>2</sup>Centre for Mental Health



# The pleasanteeism phenomenon



A sensation undoubtedly experienced by many of us, pleasanteeism is the feeling that we always have to display our best self and show that we're 'okay', regardless of whether we're stressed, under too much pressure, or in need of help.

**Our recent research revealed that just over half (51%) of UK workers feel like they have to put on a brave face for their colleagues,** while a quarter (25%) are worried about having to be the best version of themselves when they return to the workplace, and one in five (19%) are also worried about their stress being visible to others.

With the pandemic notably taking a toll on our lives, it's evident that resilience, to a greater or lesser extent, is at an all-time low and behind the scenes people are struggling, yet we don't feel able to open up about it at work. Why?

Dr Ben Littlewood-Hillsdon, Medical Director at HealthHero: **"The workplace can be a competitive environment and sometimes you need the system to take care of you first. It's been a difficult year for everybody, and organisations can often lose sight of the individual and focus solely on the business. They need to recognise that staff might be acting like everything is fine, but this may be because they're afraid to show signs of weakness."**

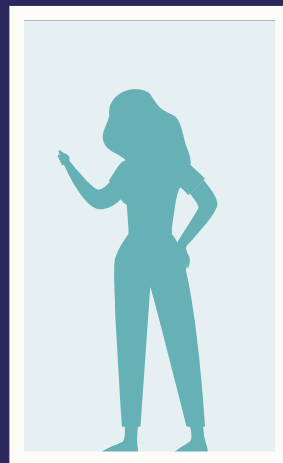
Being unable to open up and confide in others has undoubtedly had a negative impact on the nation's ability to bounce back, **all the more important as 40%\* state that they feel less resilient now than they did before the pandemic.**

Interestingly, while many people appear to be putting on a brave face in front of their colleagues, they believe they can easily recognise similar struggles in fellow staff members. 40%\* of respondents noted that they could tell that other people in their organisations were struggling with their mental health, while over a third (37%)\* even became concerned about the mental health of a colleague during the pandemic.



Sheena McDermott, Acting Head of Leadership and Management Programmes at Be the Business: **"People are scared of the discrimination that they might face if they admit weakness. They fear that people may feel that they're not up to the job, or that they won't be given interesting projects if they seem too stressed to take on additional work."**

\*This finding combines respondents who said 'Strongly agree' or 'Somewhat agree'.





## Women are bearing the brunt

Although the pandemic has had a negative impact on the majority, there are clear signs that women may be disproportionately impacted by the pandemic eroding resilience. It has been widely reported that women took on a larger share of childcare and unpaid work during lockdowns, being forced to juggle work and family commitments to an unprecedented degree. For example, according to the Office for National Statistics<sup>3</sup>, women did on average two-thirds more of the childcare duties per day than men during the first lockdown from April to July 2020.

In fact, our survey revealed that nearly half (46%)\* of women believe their mental health has worsened during the pandemic, and not only that but they are over a third more likely to feel the consequences of low resilience – 41% reporting problems with sleeping, and 29% shutting themselves off from people, compared to 27% and 21% of men respectively.

The sense of pleasanteeism and brave face culture is more pronounced in women than men too. **Nearly six in 10 (56%) of women – compared to 45% of men – said they feel like they have to put on a brave face for their colleagues - which rises to 61% of young women aged 16-24.\*** Strikingly, almost a third (29%) of women are more concerned about having to be their best self as they come back into the office, compared to one in five (20%) men.

McDermott: "Women in particular can have all kinds of challenges in addition to their working lives. Often being the primary caregiver for children at home, having elderly parents to look after, all sorts of things that can cause large amounts of stress behind the scenes. But many organisations are yet to establish a culture whereby people feel they can be open about it, and that they won't be negatively perceived as making complaints or not being focussed enough on their work."

McDermott: "As a woman in business, there is an underlying feeling that you can't let the side down, you can't be seen as weak compared to your male counterparts. It's a competitive environment and you have to keep going or be seen as less reliable than the men."

<sup>3</sup> [Office of National Statistics](#)

\*This finding combines respondents who said 'Strongly agree' or 'Somewhat agree'.

### Tomorrow's talent is at risk

It's not just women who are suffering from low resilience and the negative impact of pleasantism, but young adults too – in particular 16–24-year-olds – who for many businesses will make up tomorrow's pool of talent as we head toward economic recovery.

Littlewood-Hillsdon: "Arguably, as younger people are at the start of their careers, they can often be acutely aware that they need to behave in a certain way that mirrors workplace expectations. They likely feel that they need to present themselves in a particular manner – one that can often be at complete odds with how they're actually feeling."

According to our research **16–24-year-olds are the most likely age group to feel that they are not coping at work (43%) or in everyday life (49%). This rises to 51% and 54% of men in this age group, respectively.\***

Young men are also more likely to feel as though they are less resilient now than they were before the pandemic, with nearly half (49%) of young men feeling this way in comparison to 40% of the general working population.\*

At the same time, over half (56%)\* of respondents in this age group said that low personal resilience impacts their ability to do their job effectively, in comparison to 44%\* of the general working population – with over a quarter (26%) admitting to frustrating consequences such as losing concentration or making a mistake at work.



McDermott: "Companies need to consider the difference between 'big A' adversity and 'small A' adversity. As you go through life, from various 'small A' experiences you build resilience for when the 'big As' come along. In a younger workforce, many people are yet to form this ability to bounce back quickly. This doesn't mean their perceptions of adversity are less valid, and companies need to be able to provide appropriate support no matter the problem."

Littlewood-Hillsdon: "Companies also need to consider that a younger person might not take much value from sitting in a room with older colleagues – they might not view their perspective on the same issue as useful or relatable. It's important that they feel able, and are given opportunities, to form relationships with peers in the workplace who will be able to support them when needed."

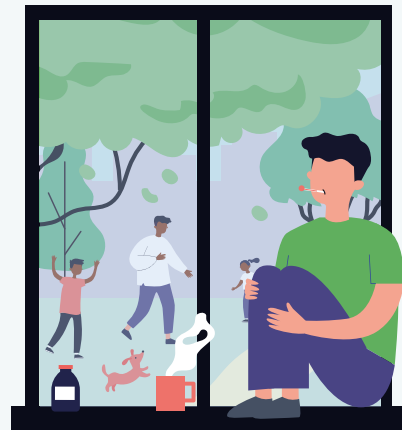
Dr Chi-Chi Obuaya, Consultant Psychiatrist: "Younger people have dynamic social ties. They are more likely to be single and not yet have families of their own yet. The impact of the pandemic may have seen them move back home with parents or older relatives, which can be challenging, particularly when in combination with loss of access to their social circles."

This fall in resilience among 16–24-year-olds is not only a big concern for individuals themselves, but also for businesses who will need to attract and retain tomorrow's talent as the economy opens up, and businesses start to grow again.



**51%**  
of UK workers  
feel like they  
have to put on  
a **brave face** for  
their colleagues.

**40%\***



**Stated that they feel less resilient** now than they did before the pandemic.

**6/10**



Nearly six in 10 (56%) of women – compared to 45% of men – said they **feel like they have to put on a brave face for their colleagues** - which rises to 61% of young women aged 16-24.\*



**16-24-year-olds are the most likely age group to feel that they are not coping at work (43%) or in everyday life (49%).** This rises to 51% and 54% of men in this age group, respectively.\*

# Perceived barriers to getting help

Regardless of our documented pleasanteism phenomenon, the results from our research showed that people are eager to take control of their mental health, but don't know how, where to start, or don't feel comfortable doing so.

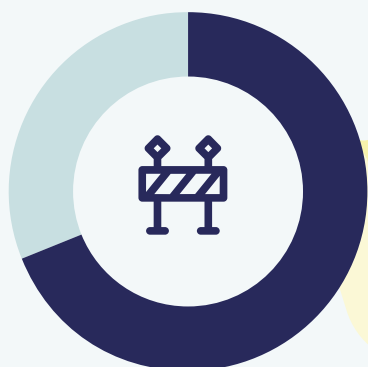
**Over two thirds (69%) of our respondents said that barriers exist to getting support for mental health, with this statistic increasing to a 93% amongst 16-24-year-olds.\*** And these barriers can come in many forms.

36%\* of our respondents admitted that they want to take control of their mental health but don't know how, and 20% don't want to make a fuss – which rises to 31% for young men aged between 16 and 24. Meanwhile, 18% don't feel comfortable talking about their mental health, and 16% worry about taking time out of work for any counselling or treatment.

If these barriers weren't enough of a problem, a large proportion of UK workers don't feel that their employers are as supportive of their mental health as they could be. **Over a third (36%) believe that their employer doesn't provide enough support for their mental health,\*** while 14% worry their employer won't be sympathetic or understanding, and 10% think it could impact their career prospects - which rises to 15% among 16-24-year-olds.



Littlewood-Hillsdon: "In my experience, organisations and employers can sometimes be too forthcoming with private information which can be concerning for their employees. Many people will question if it's worth approaching their boss to admit they're struggling if that information isn't kept between closed doors. There needs to be an engrained focus on confidentiality and trust."

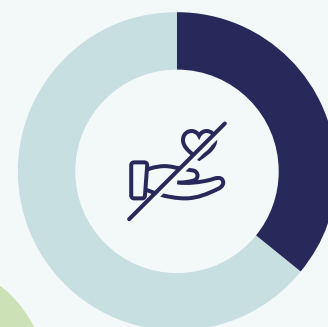


**69%**

Over two thirds (69%) of our respondents said that **barriers exist to getting support for mental health**, with this statistic increasing to a 93% amongst 16-24-year-olds.\*

**36%**

Over a third (36%) believe that their employer **doesn't provide enough support for their mental health**.\*



\*This finding combines respondents who said 'Strongly agree' or 'Somewhat agree'.

# What can businesses do to help?

Despite these barriers, people's expectations of their employers are changing, and for the better. Many UK workers will no longer allow businesses to sit on the side-lines when it comes to their mental health. But there is still a long way for employers to go to give staff the support they need. But how far off are we in reality?

According to our findings, only 16% of people feel very well supported by their employer when it comes to their mental health, while 27% feel not particularly well supported, and 13% feel not at all well supported. This comes in stark contrast to the **81% of us that want employers to support mental wellbeing – this rises even further to nearly all (99%) young men between 16 and 24-years-old.**

McDermott: "Every company wants to talk about how supportive they are but that doesn't mean the stigma around mental health has disappeared, or that individuals will be less concerned about exposing their own vulnerabilities. It takes a lot more than a LinkedIn post about company culture to break down entrenched barriers. It takes real change."

What shines through is a clear need for businesses to be doing more when it comes to mental health, and a correlating eagerness from UK employees to see more support from their employers. 42% of our respondents expect their employer to do more to support their mental wellbeing, with the same number saying their expectations are higher now than they have been previously, while **40% would even look for a new job if their employer didn't support their mental wellbeing.\***

McDermott: "If there's one positive that came out of COVID-19, it's that people are more in tune with themselves. As we come out of the pandemic, businesses need to remember that we are a changed workforce, we are not the people that first went into our spare rooms to work from home 18 months ago. We are different and we have new expectations."



And meeting the expectations of staff need not require too much time, money or resources. Many of us would simply welcome quick fix initiatives such as allowing time out to deal with personal commitments.

When asked how they'd like their employers to support them, our respondents suggested being more **mindful about their workload and work/life balance (25%), greater flexibility in working hours (22%), time out to deal with personal commitments and issues (20%), mental health days off work (20%), and the opportunity to regularly reflect on their wellbeing (16%).**

Littlewood-Hillsdon:

"Organisations need to enforce a cultural shift from the top. If you have a board member or CEO who is very open about mental health and resilience, it helps the rest of the company see that their commitment is authentic. It offers them the opportunity to live and breathe those principles and helps people to open up."



# 81%

**of us want employers to support our mental wellbeing** – this rises even further to nearly all (99%) young men between 16 and 24-years-old.\*



# 40%

**would even look for a new job if their employer didn't support their mental wellbeing.\***

**Employees would like their employers to better support them in the following ways:**

Be mindful about their **workload and work/life balance (25%), offer greater flexibility in working hours (22%), give time out to deal with personal commitments and issues (20%), provide mental health days off work (20%), and give the opportunity to regularly reflect on their wellbeing (16%).**



\*This finding combines respondents who said 'Strongly agree' or 'Somewhat agree'.



# Our recommendations

We know that small business owners and management teams have a lot on their plates already. And we appreciate that adding mental health to the list may make the job seem like a never-ending and impossible task, but it doesn't need to feel this way.

Clearly, at a minimum, employers have a responsibility to provide a safe working environment, to respect their employees and abide by their legal obligations and rules of employment. And that's where it stops for many. However, in everyday life, there are plenty of small actions that people can take to improve mental wellbeing and boost resilience. The same can be said for the workplace – employers have many options at their disposal for helping support their staff, and they don't come from a strict playbook of rules to follow either.

The first and most important step is having mental health firmly on the radar. We know that each workforce is different and there's no one size fits all approach – each company will be facing different and unique challenges. That's why, with help from our expert mental health panellists, we have developed a range of recommendations for UK businesses on how they can best support the mental health and resilience of their employees.



At Lime, we believe that these fall into three simple categories:



01

**Informal:**

Easy cultural changes



02

**Practical:**

Quick fix workplace practices



03

**Technical:**

Pain free tools and solutions





01

## Informal:

Easy cultural changes

### 1. Understand what is happening in your business

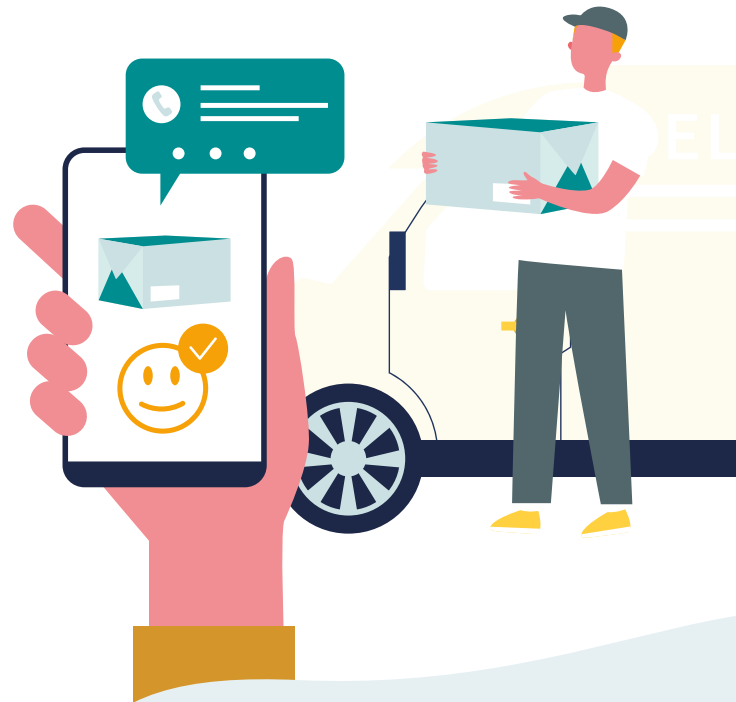
A simple and easy employee survey can tell you a lot about how people are feeling and, coupled with a quick look at absence data you can reveal a lot about your company culture and staff with minimal effort. Locating the pain points is truly the first step before making any cultural or practical decisions.

McDermott: "Collect your data, do your employee surveys, take those practical steps. Done anonymously, they can provide a range of insight without uncomfortable, formal feedback processes."

### 2. Create opportunities to connect and level the playing field

Creating opportunities for colleagues to chat and relate to each other outside of "work" can be really valuable. Not everyone feels comfortable speaking their mind, so it's worth getting creative to find ways to bring people out of their shells. These moments also help employees see that the boss isn't simply the boss; they're approachable, they're human. Whether it's looking for things in common, or going for drinks after work, simple steps can help foster positive, open and authentic relationships across all company levels.

McDermott: "A business I previously worked with said the single best thing he did for the mental health of his workforce was creating a fantasy football league. It enabled him to open a debate with just about anybody. It started a dialogue and gave him a familiarity that allowed him to open up conversations about how people were really doing."



### 3. Leaders: Walk the walk!

One thing that will help in this journey is more vocal support from senior members of the team. If management teams feel comfortable sharing their own challenges and experiences, employees will find it easier to open up about their own problems and concerns too. After all, sharing is caring.

Obuaya: "Leadership is crucial. And in this case leaders should start to share their own struggles. They don't have to be huge issues, it could be relationship troubles, work-life balance concerns, anything. Opening up in this way changes the atmosphere and makes it easier for others to talk about what's going on in their own lives."



# 02

## Practical:

### Quick fix workplace practices

#### 1. Allow employees to take a step back

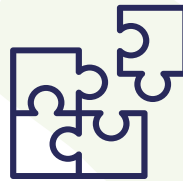
With remote working encroaching on work-life balance for many of us, companies need to actively encourage employees to step back and take the time to find some headspace. We're all guilty of working outside of hours every now and again, but that time to extract oneself, calm down and recalibrate is essential during busy, high pressure days.

Littlewood-Hillsdon: "Simple initiatives such as a 'free hour' in the day that can't be filled with meetings, implementing the 'fake commute' as a period for people to leave their screens to go for a walk, or even introducing larger initiatives such as a nine-day fortnight can help people to reset and build up their resilience."

#### 2. Suggest selfcare initiatives

Wellbeing initiatives don't always need to be led by the business, and simple suggestions for small, mindful practices that employees can do in their own time can go a long way. Exercise, meditation, yoga - all forms of selfcare are positive steps on the road to increased resilience. There is also an abundance of free wellbeing apps that don't require a subscription or costly commitments, so take some time to point employees in the right direction.

Obuaya: "Mindfulness meditation can really help employees. Once a week, a 10-minute meditation period can be very helpful. It's informal and cost effective, giving people the chance to stop, pause and reflect on how they are doing."



# 03

## Technical:

### Pain free tools and solutions

#### 1. Consider mental health tools and services

Looking back at our research, nearly one in five (18%) workers would like their employer to support them with access to counselling. And a further 16% would like access to tools that help them recognise what support they might need with their mental wellbeing. So, why not implement a couple of easy tools and solutions that increase introspection and support resilience in the long-term?

#### 2. Mental health training can be just as valuable as first aid training

There are a wide range of workplace training courses available, not least for mental health. These courses can be a useful tool to not only spot potential mental health concerns across the business but learn how to approach them. It may also be helpful to select someone in the business to be in charge of championing mental health. It doesn't have to be onerous, but it will show your staff that the organisation is serious about it and ensure they know exactly who they can go to for help.

Obuaya: "Mental Health First Aid training is widely available but not often considered. It can be hard to know how to tackle mental health issues within the workplace, but this type of training gives people a framework to understand the key issues and take action at the appropriate times."

# Conclusion

**Allowing workplace pleasanteeism and brave face culture to go unaddressed is not only detrimental to the mental health of thousands of UK workers, but to the prospects of UK businesses as they emerge from the pandemic.**

It's only by drawing attention to and recognising the importance of mental health that we can start to fully support one another to be as healthy, resilient and happy as possible.

While we know there has been a lot of discussion around mental health and resilience, a crucial part of the puzzle is still missing – on the ground change. As we adjust to the new reality of learning to live with COVID-19, it is crucial that every organisation takes some action. As we've seen, it doesn't have to be costly, complicated or onerous. Even the smallest business can take steps to support their staff, to talk

about their concerns, improve their mental health and build resilience through real, practical and easy actions that can truly make a difference.

As part of this commitment, we are bringing a portfolio of affordable and accessible health services to market that will directly support businesses and their entire workforce's health and wellbeing, promoting positive mental health and strengthening resilience.



## Report methodology:

This research is based on a survey of 2,132 UK workers including a minimum of 250 who work for SMEs and 250 who are self-employed, commissioned by Lime Global Limited and conducted by Censuswide between 06.05.21 and 11.05.21. Censuswide abides by and employs members of the Market Research Society which is based on the ESOMAR principles.

# Meet the Panel

## Dr Chi-Chi Obuaya Consultant Psychiatrist

Dr Obuaya is a Consultant Psychiatrist in the NHS and in private practice, both in London. He is also the Head of the Clinical Board at The Soke, a private mental health and wellness centre, a Clinical Adviser for a digital behavioural health start-up, Hello Tomo, and a Director for the Mind & Soul Foundation, a charity exploring wellbeing from a psychological and spiritual perspective.

A graduate of University College Medical School, Dr Obuaya has an International Health BSc from the University of London and an MBA from Imperial College.

Dr Obuaya commonly sees patient with Mood & Anxiety Disorders, Eating Disorders, trauma-related mental health problems and perinatal disorders.



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## Place of registration:

England and Wales. Registered number: 10180963.  
Lime Global Limited is authorised and regulated  
by the Financial Conduct Authority. Registration number 759122.

The Financial Service Register can be accessed through [www.fca.org.uk](http://www.fca.org.uk).

## Sheena McDermott Acting Head of Leadership and Management Programmes, Be the Business

Sheena McDermott is Acting Head of Leadership and Management Programmes for Be the Business, a national non-profit organisation focused on improving the productivity of UK businesses.

Sheena's role involves creating opportunities for collaboration between businesses, through mentoring, peer learning and sharing of insight across sectors. This has given her insight into the particular pressures that owners and managers of small businesses have felt during the pandemic, as well as the steps that businesses of different sizes have taken to support their workforces.

In addition to roles in both the private and public sectors, Sheena previously established a social enterprise supporting sandwich generation women at risk of dropping out of the workforce and is an actively involved trustee of a charity focused on food insecurity.

## Dr Ben Littlewood-Hillsdon, Medical Director, HealthHero

USA Trained and Qualified, Advanced Trauma Life Support Specialist, Senior Orthopaedic Trauma Consultant, with a career in healthcare quickly approaching 30 years. Experience in providing direct medical care in a military, private and state funded sectors led Ben to spending recent years leading clinical teams and organisations in delivering whole system excellence. He's been with Doctorlink for 3 years and Ben is often asked for professional comment by various media outlets.