

EDITION 1 | WELLBEING



# The People First Culture Series



| In partnership with Liberty Mind

# Introduction

At Breathe we're always looking for new ways to help SMEs better support their people, to ultimately attain a more productive and engaged workforce.

So in this first edition of The People First Culture Series we set out to address some **BIG** questions around the state of employee wellbeing and its link to company culture.

In April 2022, we surveyed 1264 employees of SMEs from across the UK\* and teamed up with **Lizzie Benton, Company Culture Coach & Founder of Liberty Mind**, to dig into the findings and explore what it all means from a culture perspective.

We wanted to discover the state of wellbeing amongst SME employees. Have the stresses and strains of the pandemic left a permanent mark in their world of work? Is hybrid working helping or hindering matters?

As the dust settles from the disruption of the past few years, what wellbeing supports are employees looking for now? And most importantly, what does the state of your company culture have to do with it all?

Here's what we discovered, together with actionable tips on wellbeing practices to make your company culture thrive.

\*Opinium Research was commissioned to conduct a nationwide online survey of 1264 adults working in UK SMEs. The survey was issued during the period 8-12th April 2022

# Patterns of being sick but working through it

Presenteeism has long been a problem for businesses. But with the after-effects of a worldwide pandemic, it appears the dial has been turned up a notch with more people now working when ill or stressed.

When participants of our survey were asked why they didn't take sick leave and were working through illness, the largest proportion of responses was based on culture problems. 32% of people could not financially afford to take time off work, 25% were too busy with their workload, and 21% felt they did not want to let their colleagues down.

## Why SME employees didn't take time off despite suffering symptoms

Symptoms weren't bad enough	Could't financially afford it
<b>41%</b>	<b>32%</b>
I was too busy	Didn't want to let colleagues down
<b>25%</b>	
<b>21%</b>	
Felt pressured to work through it	
<b>20%</b>	
Worried colleagues would think less of me	Other
<b>12%</b>	<b>6%</b>



**47%**

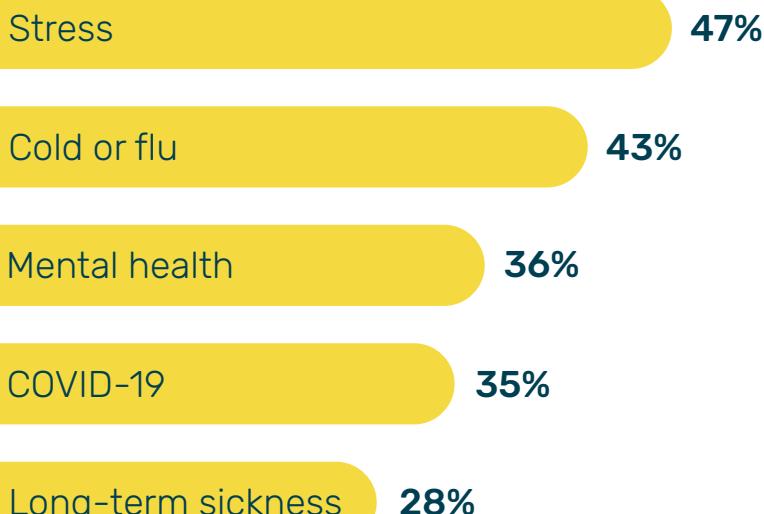
of SME employees said they had suffered from stress in the past three months, with 12% taking sick leave because of this.



Presenteeism continues to be a growing cultural issue among businesses. People may be 'at work', but they are not fully present in mind and body.

According to our findings over a third of SME employees (35%) say they had suffered from COVID-19 at some point in the past three months, including 14% who say they didn't take sick leave.

## What SME employees had suffered from in the previous 3 months:



However, more concerningly, a higher percentage of people have struggled with stress or mental health.

As we're all aware, it's not just the virus of COVID-19 that has touched upon the state of employee wellbeing. Stress, mental health and long-term illness, are all part of the picture which impact people's ability to bring their whole selves to work.

The symptoms of a cold, flu or even COVID-19, are clear for all to see. We can all recognise a sore throat, coughing and sneezing. But the pain of stress and mental health is easily hidden, and can easily go undetected.

The '**silent pandemic**' is the one that can be missed over the hyper-digital communication we've become used to over the past two years. From instant messaging, zoom calls, and emails, it's far harder to pick up on the signs that someone is struggling with stress or poor mental health than if you were together in the same environment.

As confirmed by our research, 65% of people say they're less likely to take sick leave when they're working from home. Despite suffering from a cold, or stress, it appears that people don't feel the need to take sick leave. Regardless of this, whether you're in the office or at home, work is still work. The mental energy, focus and productivity you need remains the same, so why are people treating it differently?

*It seems that among businesses there is a culture of pressure to keep calm and carry on, even in the face of declining personal health.*

Looking at the data - around not being able to afford sick leave - you may think this has nothing to do with you. We beg to differ. While you can't tell people how to spend their money, you can offer them a living wage, better sick pay, and provide education on financial resources.

As an employer, it's your legal and ethical responsibility to pay people fairly for the work they do. Pay is a key part of your company culture because it truly tells people how they're valued.

After the past two years, many people will be looking at the way they were treated by their employer when they were unwell or struggling. Without knowing it your company's reputation will be on the line.

People feel too busy to take sick leave and feel too guilty to leave their colleagues in the trenches. But the workplace martyr is a dangerous culture trait. Not only does it signify that leadership is not leading by example, but it eventually builds up to deep internal resentment. It starts with a bit of moaning about how overworked everyone is, swiftly evolving into a toxic culture. And before you know it people are leaving because they're not sure why they sacrificed their health for work.

**65%**

of SME employees said they are less likely to take sick leave when they are working from home.



# 5 plays to put into action

**Working whilst ill is unsustainable**, and while it may not feel like a big problem right now in your business, we can guarantee that if you don't take some action to resolve it, you're going to be dealing with a far bigger headache in a few months.

Workplace wellbeing has too often been referred to as the 'fluffy stuff' in company culture, when in reality it requires shifting the ways you're working – which can be the hardest of them all. You have to transform outdated mindsets, and unlearn years of toxic workplace conditioning.

**1.** Business owners and senior leaders have to **lead by example**. Your people will never feel safe taking a sick day if you're not the ones showing them how it's done. Be transparent about your sick day, vulnerability is **not a weakness**, it's a leadership superpower that enables others to come forward with their struggles. And a sick day includes stopping all emails and phone calls. Remember that your actions and behaviour set the standard in the company culture.

**2.** Without realising it, many companies have a culture where they unconsciously praise overwork. From giving promotions and pay rises to those who overwork, to outright celebrating it in team meetings. **Praising overwork has to stop**. Instead, get clear about the behaviours in your culture you want to encourage, and how these will be celebrated.

**3.** **Pay matters to people**, and it's a core signifier of your company culture. As well as improving sick pay, or sickness support schemes, look at other ways in which you can support your people with personal finance issues.

**4.** Work with your team to **understand workloads**. Start this by holding a session where everyone shares what tasks and projects they are working on, get it all written down so you can truly see what is important, and where things can be moved around. This activity should be a team effort and not a top-down approach.

**5.** Conduct **wellbeing check-ins** at the start of every team meeting. Whether you host these online or in-person, make it part of the meeting agenda to spend 10 minutes of everyone doing a round of check-ins. This doesn't need to be lengthy speeches, but a mindful understanding of how people are feeling and what they are bringing with them. This can be done using a simple stress meter and everyone placing a sticky note of where they are on that bar, for example.



# Working from home boosts wellbeing, but not for everyone

Working from home has become the new normal for many office-based workers, and for the majority of people, it's working. Among those SME employees who work from home, 67% say that doing so improves their work-life balance, with 59% declaring that they feel less stressed when working from home.

The data probably doesn't surprise you - after all, working from home has not only been proven to give people that uninterrupted time of deep focus and productivity, but it also supports those with caring responsibilities (whether that's caring for children or the elderly).

To some, working from home may have been the norm well before the pandemic, however, for most businesses and employees this is something completely new which has dramatically changed company culture and the way work gets done.

## The challenges of working from home according to SME employees

More likely to work longer hours than usual

**54%**

Less likely to take sick leave

**65%**

Feel more under pressure to be productive

**42%**

Have to make myself 'seen' more to be working

**44%**

## The positives of working from home according to SME employees

Feel more productive

**57%**

Feel less stressed

**59%**

Supports my work-life balance

**67%**

**54%**

of SME employees are more likely to work longer hours than usual when working from home

**59%**

of SME employees feel less stressed when working from home



Whilst working from home certainly has many benefits, especially for those who struggle with long-term illness or disability, it's not without its flaws. From our research, over half (54%) of people who work from home are more likely to work longer hours.

Working from home is beneficial for many people, but there's room for improvement that needs to be addressed.

As jobs are now more accessible at home, it's far too easy to check that email after dinner or send that quick message to a colleague while running a bath. People are simply not switching off.

The 'always on' mode that we're conditioning is detrimental to long term health and productivity. But unfortunately, this is an area that either businesses don't know how to handle, or are unconsciously encouraging. After all, as long as the work is getting done, what's the harm?

The truth is, having a hybrid culture takes genuine care and consideration. Unlike when you work in an office (where you can shut the door and leave work at work). When working from home, work is always there. As a business, you

may already have policies or guidelines about working from home, perhaps even discouraging late-night emails. But while some may follow the rules, others may work through their inbox while binge-watching Netflix.

The spectrum of how working from home affects wellbeing is vast, because it'll be different for everyone depending on their home environment, their working style, their life responsibilities, and even their social background.

*Working from home isn't a quick fix to wellbeing, and as we've seen from the data, people are still working from home while ill. The solutions aren't easy, and it will take testing and trialling new ideas to create a hybrid work solution that works for everyone.*

Working from home can be a huge benefit to your team and be a key indicator of your company culture and the way you work. But it's important to understand where the pitfalls are so that you can work together to build a unique culture that doesn't feel disjointed from the one you have in the office.

# 5 plays to put into action

Many companies might give up on working from home at the first sign of a challenge, but the real treasure lies in the innovation you discover when you **commit to trying something new**. Just because there are some pitfalls in remote working, doesn't mean it can't work for your business or your people.

**1.** Working from home is not going anywhere, you'll need to collaborate with your team to create better boundaries.

**Co-creating a work from home guide** should empower people to know what's expected of them, and give them the confidence to call in sick while working from home if needed.

**2.** Consider how you will translate your office culture into a remote culture, and vice versa. This is a great time to experiment and think about new ways of working together that will **boost your team's wellbeing** no matter where they choose to work.

**3.** Get to the deeper reasons behind overworking. It's easy to make assumptions about overwork, so ensure you're having **regular check-ins** with your team to ensure there are not any other culture issues that are under the surface. You need to discover what's ultimately driving the overwork culture at home. Is it that people feel they need to overwork to prove that work from home is working, or are they having trouble disconnecting from work?

**4.** Learn from others who have been doing it for longer than you. Many companies have implemented working from home long before the COVID-19 pandemic, so learn from them. Get in touch with other companies in your sector who have a remote-first culture and get their input. Now is the time to be **collaborative, not competitive**.

**5.** If you intend on still keeping a physical workspace, get together with your team and rethink what this space is to your company. There's no point going from one desk at home to another in a grey box miles away. **Think about the experiences and work type you want to generate in that space**. Perhaps the office simply becomes a purely social and creative space, not where deep focus happens, but where collaboration and connection takes place.



# Wellbeing supports that go beyond the basics

A year never passes without there being yet another wellbeing trend dominating the workplace. But putting the quirks and gimmicks aside, what do people really want to support their wellbeing at work?

As a business, wellbeing initiatives may not only be costly, but they also take time to implement. This is why choosing benefits that are going to truly be utilised by your team can feel overwhelming. There are many stories where companies have adopted the latest wellbeing fad, only to realise it was never helpful to their team in the first place.

To get a true picture of what matters to people and their workplace wellbeing, we compiled a list of the most popular wellbeing benefits and asked SME employees if these were what they wanted.

The clear winner among everything that's currently offered to people, is flexible working.

According to our findings 48% of SME employees are offered flexible working, but 27% are not offered it but would find it the most useful benefit. Flexible working isn't just something people want. Those who have it, find it highly beneficial to their wellbeing.

The fact is, the inflexibility of employers is detrimental to people's wellbeing.





**48%**

of SME employees said  
their company offers  
flexible working

There's a common belief that flexible working is just a benefit for working parents, and while they are the biggest group to gain advantages from flexible working, this is a very narrow-minded point of view.

### Company benefits given to SME employees that are seen as beneficial:



\*e.g. mental health / money management training

Flexible working has been proven time and time again to support those with long-term illness and disability. Disability activists have been championing flexible working for decades because so many people are out of work due to the lack of flexible working.

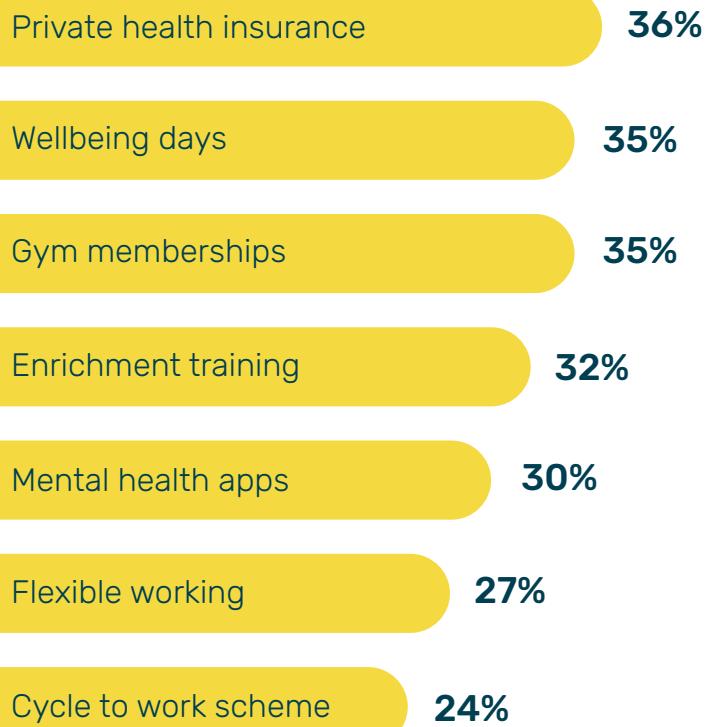
This isn't just a wellbeing benefit, it's a core part of the diversity and inclusion of your company culture.

*Flexibility touches across all generations and social backgrounds. If you're serious about making an inclusive company culture, then a place to start is with flexible working.*

The reason workplace flexibility has taken so long to get off the ground pre-COVID is the lack of trust in company culture. There's a belief that people can't be trusted, or may even take advantage of it. So we create cultures where we distrust the majority of our workforce with archaic rules and policies, because of the minority.

Instead, the focus in the culture should be results-driven, not input driven. When people know the goal they need to achieve, they can self-manage to meet it.

## Company benefits that are not given to employees, but would be beneficial:



Flexible working comes in many forms, but ultimately it supports the blurred lines that are now ever-present in our work-life. Beyond flexible working, 35% of SME employees feel that wellbeing days would be helpful.

If the past two years have taught us anything, it's that health is something we can never take for granted.

Wellbeing days not only offer your team further education on their own health and lifestyle but offer up the chance to connect as a team on more meaningful matters. Imagine a company culture where everyone felt healthier and more confident to openly talk about stress or mental health. That's a future we should all be striving for.

**35%**  
of SME employees said that whilst they don't currently have wellbeing days offered by their company, they feel such a scheme would be helpful



# 5 plays to put into action

In the past businesses have been prescriptive about wellbeing, offering only what managers or leaders think would work, instead of talking to the very people these initiatives are going to impact.

It's the end of free fruit Fridays and yoga. Workplace wellbeing now needs to go beyond tokenistic gestures and provide people with the **genuine care and support they need to work well**.

## 1. Consider flexible working options

**with your team.** Whether that's a 4-day work week, working from home, a 6 hour day, or compressed hours. Look at the options that are out there and set-up a trial together.

anything could be part of the wellbeing support offered - what would it be? Don't limit yourself to just what's currently available.

## 2. Don't take on any wellbeing initiative without running it by your team. It's easy to get swept up in the hype, but **get their feedback** on whether this will be genuinely helpful.

**5.** With wellbeing days, consult with your employees about what learning or support they would love to see, and perhaps create a calendar of events. It's important to **collaborate with your team** on this because there will be some things people won't feel comfortable with, for example, not everyone wants to do yoga in front of their colleagues. So, get as many ideas together as you can from all team members, but whatever you do, don't make it mandatory. Nothing makes people feel more stressed and anxious than being forced to attend a wellbeing event they don't want to go to.

## 3. Regularly **check in with your team** about their wellbeing needs and compare that to what the company is offering. Have open discussions about what's working, and what's not working. Avoid a suggestion box as this never gives context. Be brave and commit the time to finding solutions together.

## 4. Be **imaginative** with your team about the wellbeing packages you could come up with. Why not ask your team if



## The debrief

You can say you care about the wellbeing of your people, but **actions speak louder than words**. You can buy into the fads and have enough wellbeing days to rival even the most prestigious health clubs; but deep down, it's how you act and behave towards your team that **truly** makes your company culture.

A culture of wellbeing goes well beyond what you can offer in your workplace benefits package. It's how you make people **feel** every day at work, and how you show up when they are going through their darkest moments.

Culture is a **human to human experience**, it translates internally and externally, showing people what really matters to you as a business. You may think culture is just the fun stuff for your team, but your real culture gets picked up on by customers and partners, and spoken about through word of mouth.

As a business, your attitudes, behaviour, and beliefs will all ultimately present to people what you truly think about employee wellbeing.

Now is not the time to ignore your culture and the true ripple effect it has on your people.

After two years of momentous life changes, employees across the UK are considering whether where they work is adding to their life or taking something away.

You get to choose whether you create a positive, healthy company culture where people create their best work and drive the business forward; or become just another place where people exchange a few hours of their life for a payslip. **What would you rather create?**



## About breathe

Back in 2012, we built our multi-award-winning platform with one thing in mind: to set SMEs free from tedious HR admin so they can **focus on their people**, develop their **company culture** & drive **productivity**.

Our simple & cost-effective software makes it super-easy to manage employee data, leave, sickness, HR-documents, training & performance, expenses, recruitment, rotas, timesheets & more.

**The result?** Small businesses can finally leave time-consuming tasks behind for good – without breaking the bank.

Breathe is 100% cloud-based, GDPR-compliant & ISO27001-accredited, with over 10,000 organisations already trusting our software to keep their data water-tight. Breathe is part of the ELMO group, with customers in the UK and Australia.

[Start your FREE 14-day trial](#)

## About Lizzie Benton, Company Culture Coach & Founder of LIBERTYMIND

Lizzie Benton is a culture specialist who supports organisations and businesses in developing a purpose-driven company culture and more autonomous teams. Lizzie has been recognised as one of the **top 30 millennials changing the world of work** and has been featured in The Metro, HuffingtonPost, Forbes and the Financial Times. Lizzie is best known for her honest approach to company culture and believes in building more organisations that support our human potential.

Lizzie's skills and training is based in new ways of working and self-managed organisations. She has trained in the Netherlands and with a leading Swedish organisation to learn from those who are leading the movement in company culture. Lizzie is a Holacracy Practitioner, TuffLeadership Practitioner, SEMCO Certified Expert and ambassador for Teal organisations.

[Learn more](#)

# The Breathe Culture Pledge

Are you serious about company culture?

Join the Breathe Culture Pledge today to put your **people first**, invest in their success, super-charge employee engagement - and ultimately **drive your business forward**.

Join for free  
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BREATHE CULTURE PLEDGE

  
**Putting  
people  
first**