



Employee wellbeing during Covid-19: A survey of London white-collar workers

August 2020



Introduction

On March 23rd, 2020, the UK government announced unprecedented nationwide lockdown measures in an attempt to slow the spread of coronavirus. The public were asked to stay at home and all non-essential businesses were ordered to close until further notice. Now, five months on, lockdown restrictions are slowly being lifted as part of a wider Covid-19 recovery strategy and the UK is beginning its transition to ‘the new normal’.

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the population’s mental health and wellbeing has sparked intense interest. Notably, data collected by YouGov in the week before full lockdown started showed that 62% of UK adults had felt anxious or worried and 18% had felt hopeless as a result of Covid-19.¹

Besides the social implications of a prospective decline in public wellbeing, there are financial consequences that threaten an already fragile economy. It is well documented that mental health-related presenteeism (being at work but not fully functioning), absenteeism and staff turnover in the workplace cost the UK tens of billions of pounds each year.² In the employment context, it is possible that coronavirus-induced stress and anxiety are intensified due to having to adapt to new ways of working and fears over job security.

With this in mind, Helix Resilience surveyed 2,000 white-collar workers in London, across a broad range of industries, to explore the effects of Covid-19 and lockdown on mental and physical wellbeing as well as lifestyle behaviours and productivity at work (see ‘About the survey’ section for further details). Key findings are presented along with recommendations for how businesses can protect employee wellbeing during the coronavirus outbreak.



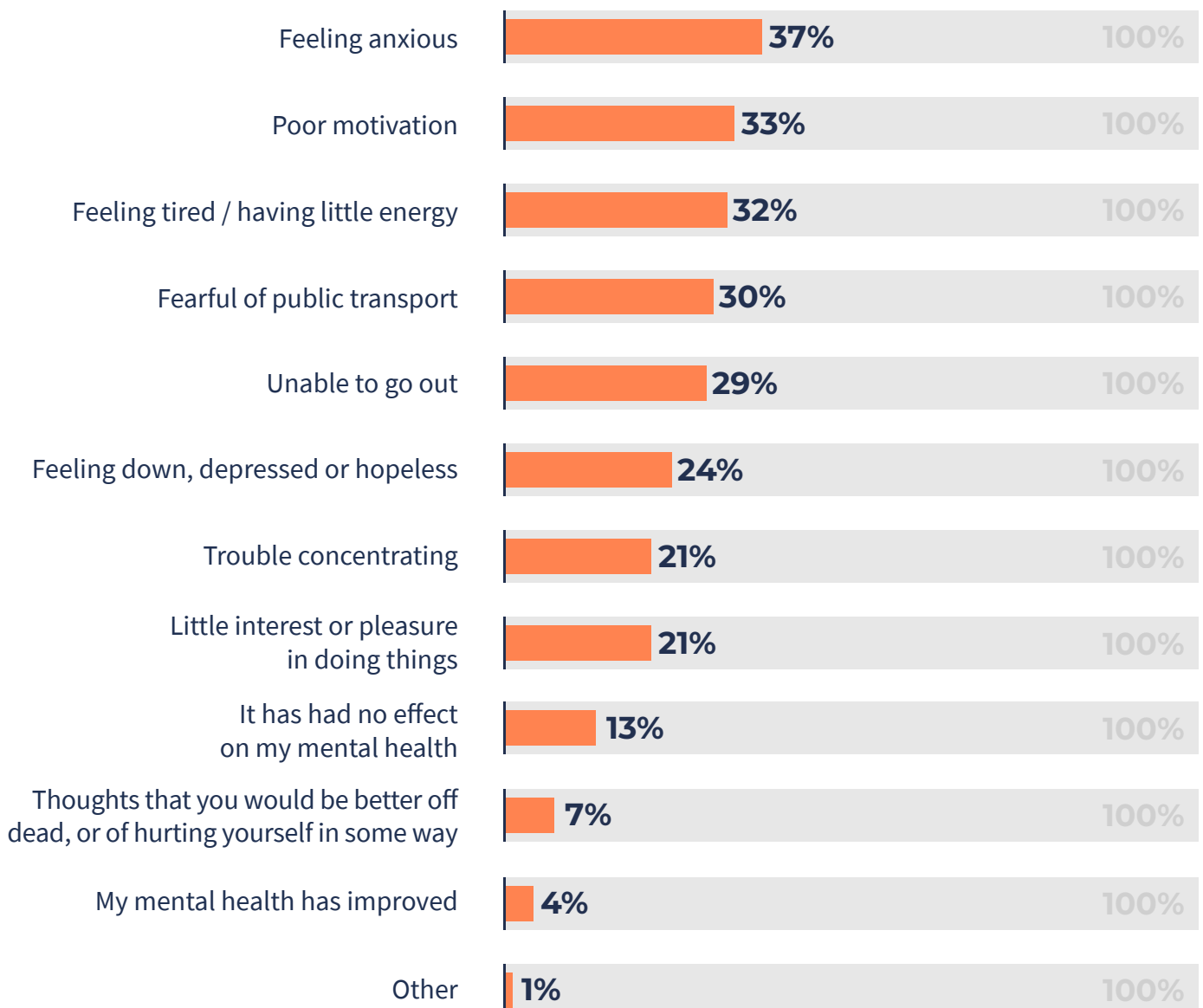
How has the Covid-19 lockdown affected employee wellbeing?

Mental health and psychological wellbeing

Covid-19 was and is an unexpected crisis with an unpredictable trajectory, unlike anything most people have experienced before. It has forced individuals to make substantial changes to their personal and professional lives and to endure heightened uncertainty over health, finances, and employment. As humans, we enjoy having a sense of control over our surroundings, and anything that challenges this perception can pose a threat to our mental health.

When asked how the Covid-19 lockdown has impacted their mental health, 83% of survey respondents declared experiencing at least one negative outcome (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: How has mental health been affected by the Covid-19 lockdown?



Base: 2,000

The effects appear to have multiple manifestations, with anxiety being the most common of those listed – endorsed by 37% of the sample – followed by poor motivation (33%) and feeling tired/having little energy (32%). Although we do not have any insight into the degree of associated distress or impairment, some of the symptoms reported could be considered normal reactions to the abnormal situation (e.g. being fearful of public transport, 30%). Others, however, have broader consequences and are indicative of more severe mental health difficulties (e.g. feeling down, depressed or hopeless, 24%, and having thoughts relating to self-harm or suicide, 7%).

When asked to comment specifically on whether their sleep had been disrupted by lockdown measures, almost half the group (46%) said that it had. In addition, just over a quarter (26%) claimed to be less resilient than they were before the lockdown period began.

Relationships with family, friends and colleagues

Loneliness and social isolation are associated with poor mental and physical health.³ Relationships are therefore integral to our wellbeing and have been at the forefront of Covid-19 commentary from the outset. While stay-at-home guidelines necessitated constant contact between many partners and families, social distancing measures separated people from those outside of their household.

Survey respondents were asked to comment on whether their relationships have been affected by the Covid-19 lockdown, and the results are presented in Figure 2.

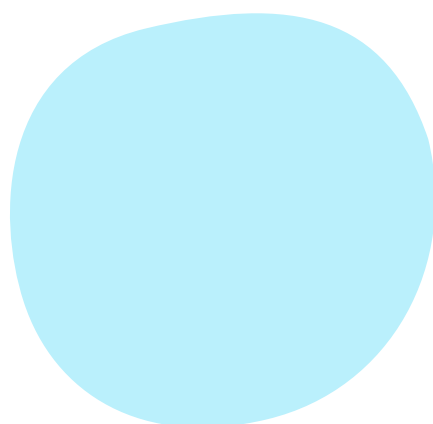
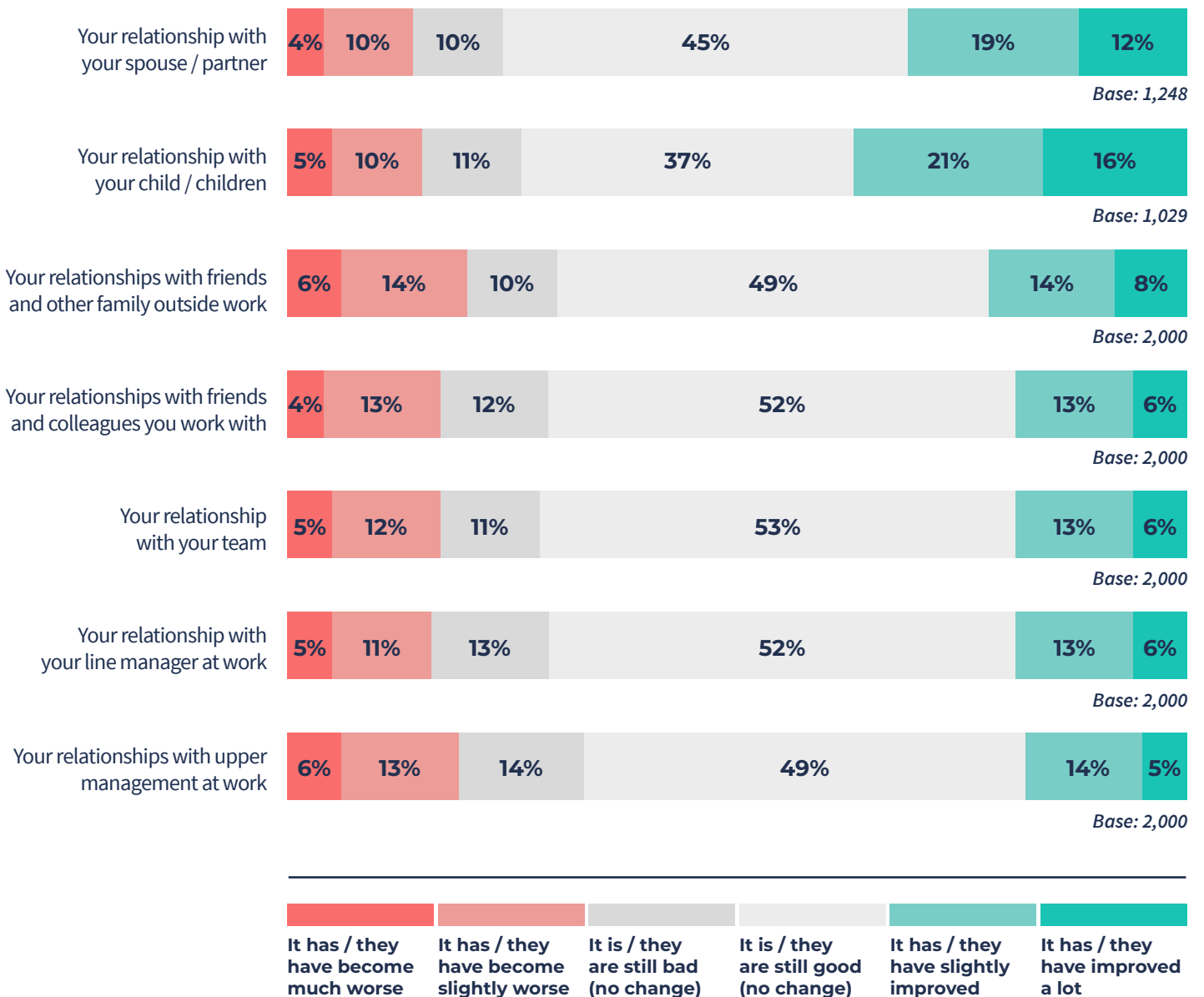


Figure 2: How have relationships been affected by the Covid-19 lockdown?



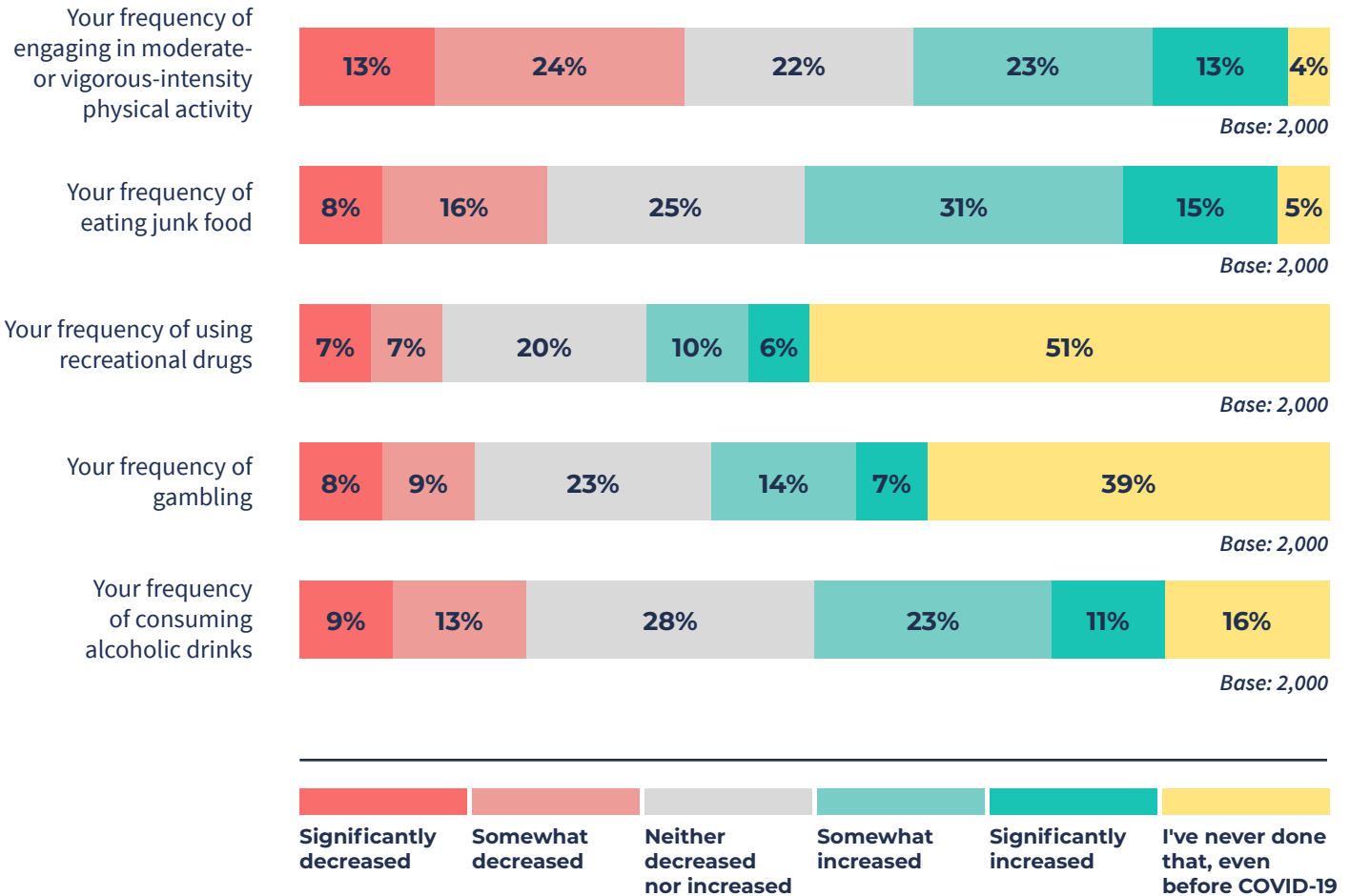
For all types of relationships questioned, the majority recounted no change. When considering relationships with friends, work colleagues, and extended family members, similar numbers of people indicated that these have become worse and better. Interestingly, relationships with spouses/partners and children have reportedly improved for sizeable proportions of the group – 31% and 37%, respectively.

Lifestyle behaviours

The social distancing and self-isolation measures enforced during Covid-19 have impacted people’s ability to maintain established routines. Whilst a major disruption to lifestyle can give rise to stress and the adoption of unhealthy behaviours such as poor diet, lack of physical exercise, and alcohol use, it can also be a powerful way to encourage the formation of new, healthy habits.

Findings from this survey demonstrate lockdown-induced lifestyles changes in both directions for white-collar workers in London (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: How have lifestyle behaviours been affected by the Covid-19 lockdown?



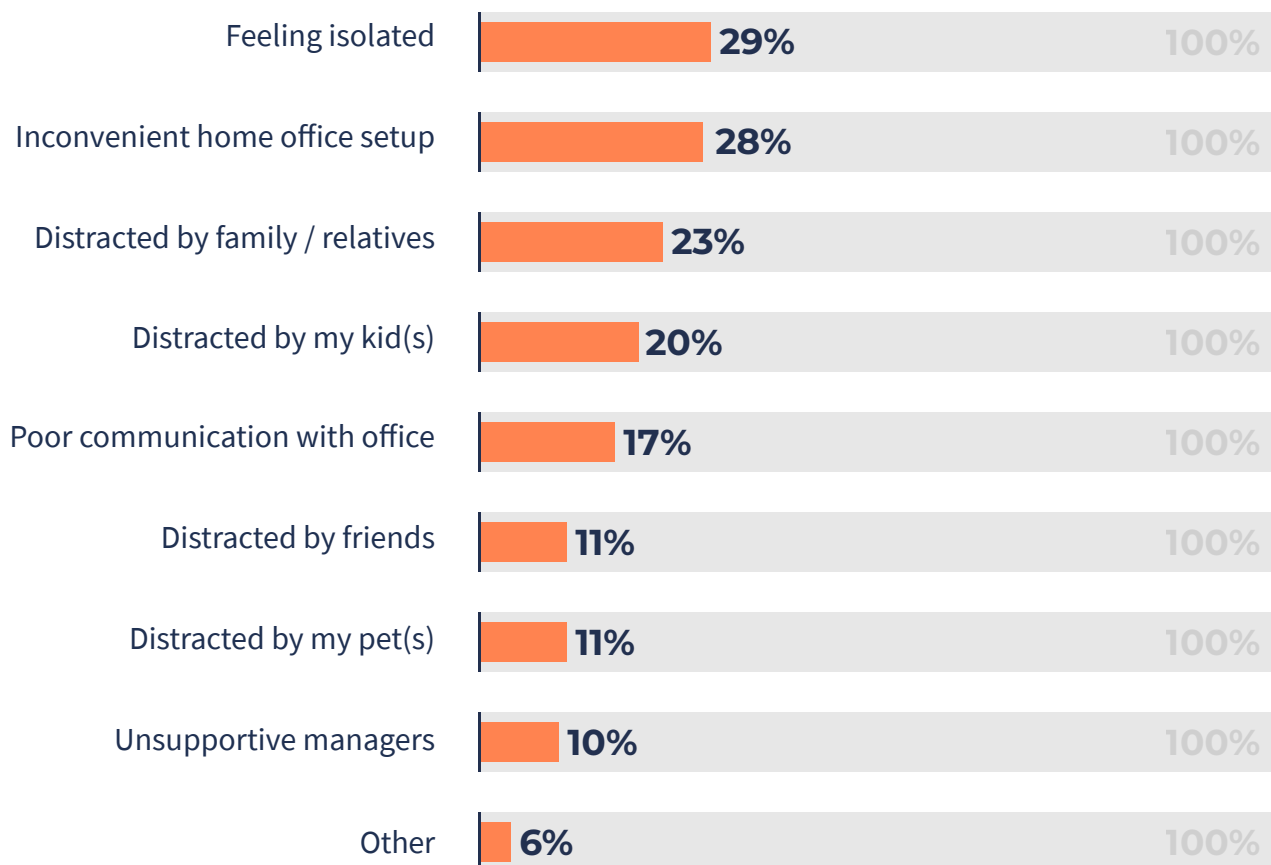
The most reported improvement was for levels of physical activity, with 37% of the group stating that they have exercised more often as a result of lockdown measures, although an equal proportion said that they have exercised less often. For all the unhealthy behaviours questioned, increases in frequency were more commonly endorsed than decreases in frequency, suggesting that the positive lifestyle outcomes of Covid-19 have been outweighed by the negatives. This pattern of results was particularly marked for alcohol and junk food consumption – the frequencies of which have increased for 34% and 47% of the sample, respectively.

Has the Covid-19 lockdown impacted productivity at work?

In one way or another, all the undesirable effects of the coronavirus pandemic that are documented in this report could be detrimental to job performance. In addition, remote working has numerous practical implications that present new challenges for individuals and teams alike. With over 1.2 million furloughed employments in the capital alone,⁴ maintaining efficiency among those still working is of paramount importance.

In this survey, just over half the sample (51%) said that they have been less productive during the Covid-19 lockdown (24% reported being more productive and 25% experienced no change). When the reasons for this diminished productivity were explored, a wide variety of responses were given (see Figure 4) – from feeling depressed or unmotivated (33%) and isolated (29%) to finding it difficult to concentrate outside of the office (30%). In addition, 28% of the group cited Inconvenient homeworking setups as a cause of inefficiency.

Figure 4: Why have employees been less productive during the Covid-19 lockdown?



*Base: 1,010
(respondents who stated they were being less productive during lockdown)*

Despite the perceived impact on productivity, 43% of respondents said they would welcome continued full-time homeworking after the lockdown and only 9% stated that they would strongly dislike it. One obvious perk for London workers is the riddance of the daily commute. Indeed, 45% of the sample said that less time spent commuting has meant an improved work-life balance.

Are employers doing enough to help?

Given the widespread emotional distress caused by Covid-19, it is now more important than ever for employers to look after the health and wellbeing of their workforce – not only from a moral standpoint but also because significant evidence exists supporting a link between wellbeing and productivity at work. Nevertheless, almost a third of survey respondents (32%) felt that their employer was not doing enough to support their wellbeing during lockdown (52% felt their employer was doing enough and 16% were not sure).

Conclusions

The UK-wide lockdown imposed in response to Covid-19 has had a multifaceted impact on the wellbeing of white-collar workers in London. Most notably, negative mental health consequences were reported by the majority of surveyed employees – likely owing to an array of factors including not being able to socialise with friends and family, feeling anxious about contracting coronavirus, and having to adapt to the sudden and rapid transformation of the workplace. Lockdown has also led some people to consume more alcohol and junk food. Nevertheless, against a backdrop of intense stress, fear and worry, the pandemic has caused some people to exercise more and has had positive effects on close relationships for many – perhaps due to the slower pace of life that lockdown has enforced which provides an opportunity to spend more quality time with loved ones.

The pervasiveness of the impact that the Covid-19 crisis has had on employee wellbeing is yet to be seen. On one hand, the easing of lockdown restrictions and the gradual return to a more familiar way of life will likely rid some people of the angst they felt during sustained self-isolation, and thus of any difficulties they experienced as a direct result. On the other, there is reason to believe that the negative effects observed in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak will persist over long time periods.

The transition to ‘the new normal’ brings with it more change and uncertainty, the introduction of new rules and restrictions, and the harsh reality that some elements of pre-pandemic life will not return in the foreseeable future. The threat of contracting the virus is also ever-present. Together, these factors present a ‘perfect storm’ for psychological distress and, during a time when access to mental health services is limited, their potential to cause serious problems for individuals and thus entire businesses is enormous.

While the UK government’s ‘stay at home’ guidance is now limited to people with possible or confirmed Covid-19 infection, large numbers of employees in white-collar jobs will continue to work remotely until further notice. Many companies have even hinted towards the end of the office age. Though our findings

suggest this would be a favourable scenario for some, a proportion of the survey respondents blamed working outside the office for their perceived reduction in productivity. The impact of homeworking on both employee wellbeing and output is something that should be monitored closely over time.

Despite the adversities that the coronavirus pandemic has inflicted upon individuals and society, there are bigger picture positives that can be taken from the crisis. The events have unified the nation and inspired unwavering solidarity and kindness among members of the public. Furthermore, the shared experience of heightened stress and worry – which is a normal reaction to an abnormal and unpredictable situation – has facilitated increased conversation about mental health and wellbeing and challenged the stigma surrounding the subject. It has also changed priorities in the workplace and brought employee wellbeing to the forefront of the agenda for businesses in the UK. With the threat of a second wave of infection looming, this is both a timely and welcomed collateral benefit of Covid-19.

Recommendations for employers

As we transition out of lockdown and into the next phase of the coronavirus crisis (from 1st August, employers were given more discretion to decide whether staff should continue to work from home) there are many ways in which businesses can safeguard employee wellbeing. From a practical perspective, employers implementing return to work strategies should follow government guidance to ensure the office is made Covid-secure,⁵ and communicate policies and expectations clearly and consistently to minimise return anxiety among staff. In addition, they should allow for some degree of flexibility to facilitate the readjustment and enable employees to plan for the care of children and vulnerable relatives. For companies continuing to endorse remote working, it is crucial to encourage and host virtual social time and to provide training for online collaboration.

Employers should also actively promote good mental health by normalising the subject, fostering an environment where staff feel comfortable disclosing distress relating to the pandemic or otherwise, and delivering mental health first aid training to line managers. Whilst these practices will undoubtedly have a positive return on investment, they take time to implement and can be resource-intensive. The emergence of digital workplace wellbeing solutions provides businesses with a way to reach employees at scale and on a daily basis. Such tools come in the form of mobile apps and web portals and typically take a science-based, preventative approach to health and wellbeing, which is more effective in reducing the cost burden associated with presenteeism and absenteeism than reactive measures. Content can be served in multiple formats to enhance engagement and anonymous wellbeing data can be fed back to employers to improve decision-making.

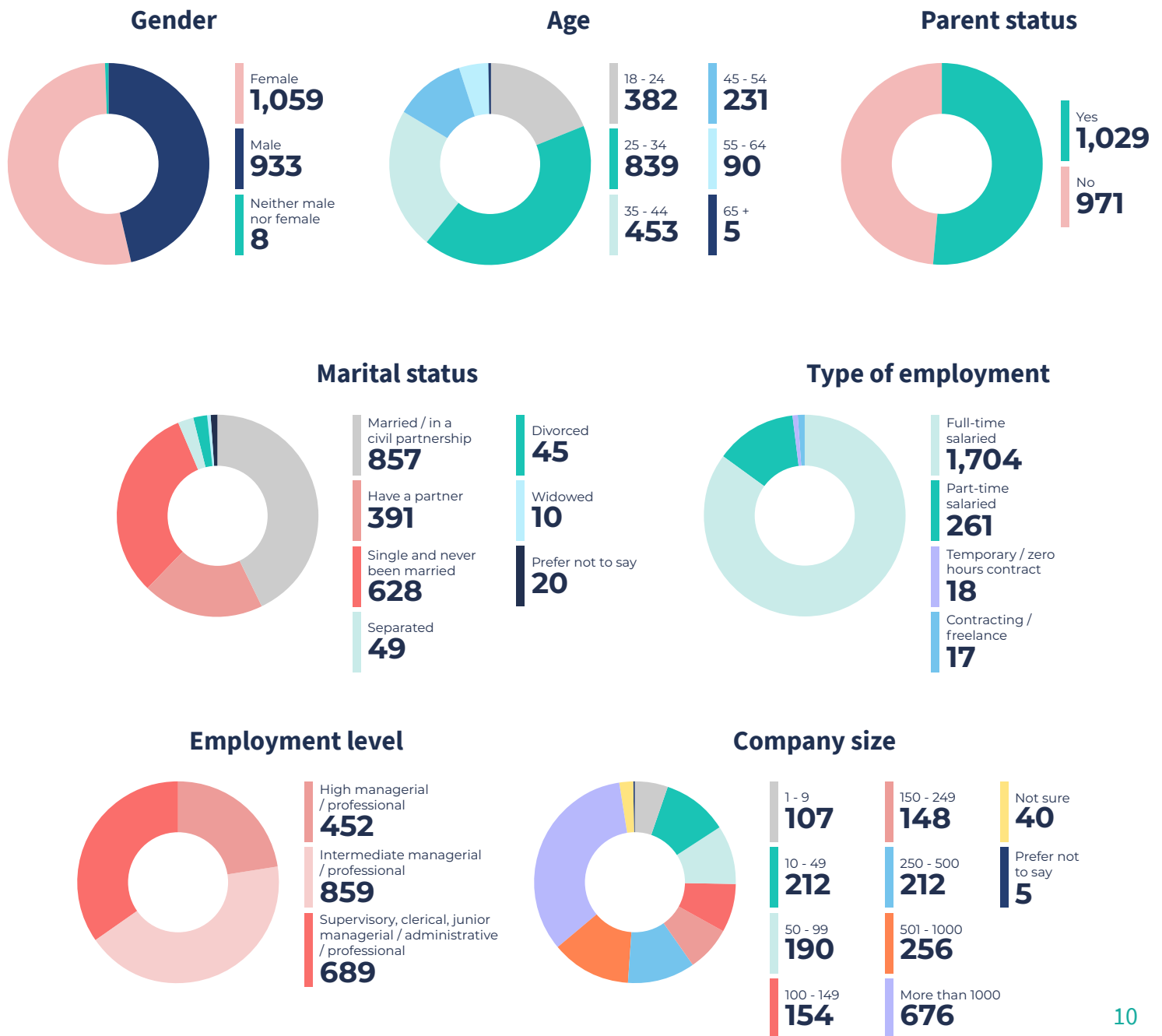


About the survey

The Helix Resilience survey was administered online during May 2020 in collaboration with Vitreous World. Questions focused on aspects of psychological and physical wellbeing likely to have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Productivity and attitudes towards changes in the workplace were also interrogated.

The sample included 2,000 white-collar workers in London across a range of employment levels and industries, though the most heavily represented sector was banking, hedge funds and financial services – accounting for 17% of the group. At the time of completing the survey, the majority of respondents (85%) were in full-time salaried employment and more than a third (34%) worked for businesses with more than 1,000 employees. Seventeen per cent reported living alone and 38% declared an ongoing health condition. Key demographic characteristics are presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Demographic characteristics of survey respondents



About Helix Resilience

Helix Resilience originated in 2019 and is the brainchild of psychiatrist Dr Stephen Pereira, who has dedicated over three decades to improving wellbeing and resilience among employees of large and small businesses. Helix Resilience specialises in corporate mental health and wellbeing – delivering specialist-led leadership programmes and a scientifically-backed, digital platform that facilitates enhanced engagement and performance at work, across the entire workforce.

Helix Resilience is committed to strengthening the foundations of employee wellbeing, health, and happiness for the benefit of both the individual and the organisation. For more information, visit www.helixresilience.com.

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