

workhuman*

Psychological Safety's Role in Workplace Wellbeing and Success

DATA-BACKED STRATEGIES TO BOOST EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH





Psychological safety has emerged as a cornerstone of thriving organizational cultures. This concept, the belief that one can speak up, take risks, and be oneself without fear of negative consequences, has taken on even greater significance in the past several years.

People are still recovering from the trauma of the shutdown of the world. And with historic layoffs, AI-driven job insecurity, the instability of the global economy, geopolitical tensions, record-high inflation, and part of the workforce on remote and hybrid schedules, workers are stressed, burned out, and lacking connection.

Wellbeing and the workplace have always been related, but now they are inextricably tied, and treating them as such is an imperative to societal recovery and future resilience.

Why psychological safety is important

Psychological safety is fundamental to fostering an environment where innovation, collaboration, and productivity flourish.

According to Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson, who coined the term, it's about creating a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves.

Research underscores its importance, showing that psychologically safe workplaces report higher levels of employee engagement, creativity, and willingness to report errors – vital for continuous improvement and gaining a competitive advantage.

- A study of more than 250 attributes by Google's People Operations department found psychological safety is the number one driver of successful teams.
- Another study from McKinsey & Company revealed psychological safety is not only tied to work performance, but also total safety and health outcomes.

Assessing the current state of psychological safety and wellbeing

The state of psychological safety today reflects a complex landscape. Inevitably, recent global challenges have seeped into the workplace, exacerbating stresses and creating more reasons to feel unsafe.

Employees are burned out, stressed, and lonely. Across industries and employee groups, Workhuman® research reveals:

48% somewhat or strongly agree they've **experienced burnout**

61% have experienced **elevated stress levels**

32% somewhat or strongly agree they've **felt lonely at work**

Source: "[How to Build Psychological Safety](#)," Workhuman, 2021

Workers have increasingly taken things into their own hands, prioritizing meaningful work, work-life balance, and wellbeing, with millions leaving their jobs or choosing remote work environments.

Nearly one-fifth of U.S. workers (19%) rate their mental health as fair or poor, and these workers report about 4x more unplanned absences than their counterparts who report good, very good, or excellent mental health.

Source: "[The Economic Cost of Poor Employee Mental Health](#)," Gallup, 2022



Linking DEI and psychological safety

Psychological safety and wellbeing have a reciprocal relationship with each other. When one is struggling, the other likely is too. For workers to be able to advocate for their wellbeing and receive help, they need to feel comfortable expressing vulnerability and authenticity to communicate their needs and connect with others.

This is essential for businesses to acknowledge if they want to retain talent and productivity. Gallup and Workhuman [research](#) reveals the cost of neglecting wellbeing:

- \$20 million of opportunity loss for every 10,000 workers due to low wellbeing and its drain on performance
- \$322 billion globally in turnover and lost productivity when low wellbeing shows up as employee burnout

Results from our [2021 U.S. workforce survey](#) of 3,079 individuals and our [2023 poll](#) of more than 4,100 full-time employees in the United States, United Kingdom, Ireland, and Canada both indicate nuance in wellbeing outcomes. Collectively, the data shows that women, working mothers, underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, and on-site workers have worse psychological safety and higher stress levels.

Some quick takeaways:

- Men experience higher psychological safety.
- Working mothers have the lowest psychological safety in a comparison of working parents and nonworking parents.
- White employees experience the highest levels of psychological safety.
- Employees forced to transition to a different work environment report lower psychological safety.

To improve wellbeing and psychological safety, it is essential to acknowledge the groups who have statistically struggled more with both.

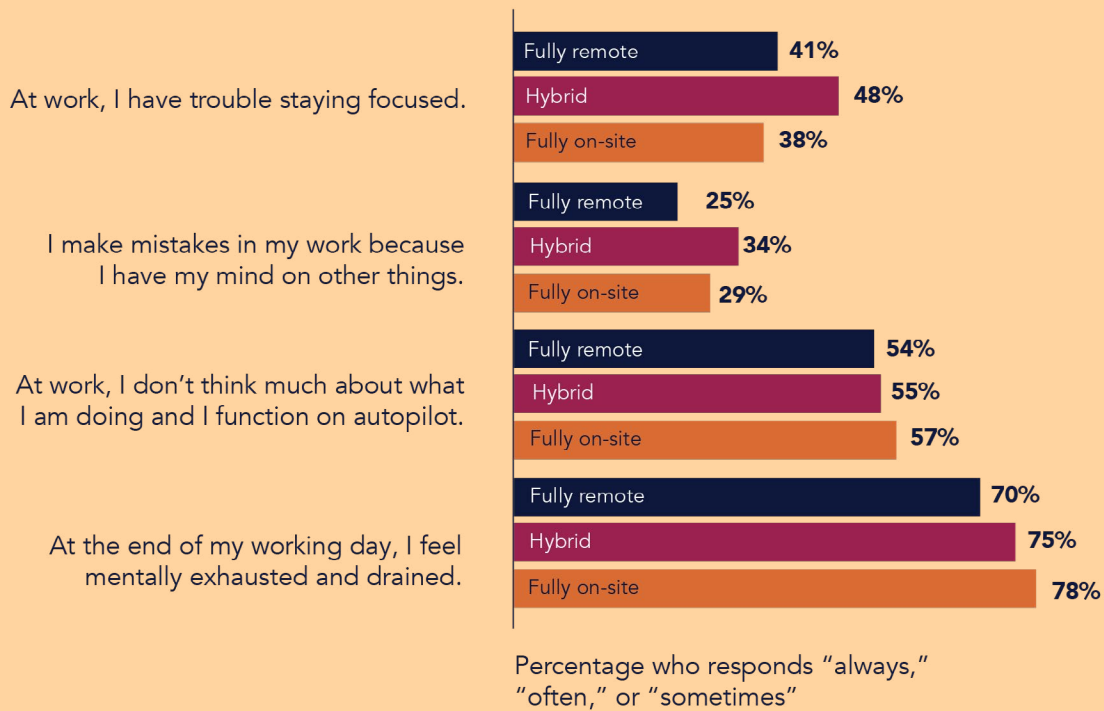
Psychological safety and return-to-work mandates

The number of people who preferred remote work and are now being asked to return to the office adds another layer of complexity. Employees returning to physical workplaces face challenges and anxieties, such as health concerns and adjusting to in-office dynamics. Ensuring psychological safety for these employees means creating an environment in which they feel secure enough to express their concerns and preferences.

One simple way to do this is to let them choose. Workhuman research reveals that having a say in where and how they work affects peoples' emotional and mental wellbeing. Hybrid workers, but especially those who did not have a say in their work arrangement, had the highest stress levels, while remote workers had the lowest.

Across all ways of working, employees who had a say in their work arrangement had lower stress levels. While more than one-third of our survey respondents (35%) did not have a say in their work arrangement, this was much higher (48%) among on-site workers.

How remote, hybrid, and on-site workers feel



Source: "The Evolution of Work," Workhuman, 2023

While most employees are functioning on autopilot no matter where they work, hybrid workers have the most trouble staying focused. On-site workers have an easier time with focus but lead the way in feeling mentally exhausted and drained.

The data shows mandating a return to office without employee preference considered could contribute to lower psychological safety.



3 ways to improve psychological safety

The good news is that by embracing strategies that help improve everyone's experience at work, you'll also boost psychological safety for the groups who are struggling the most. Read on for some ideas, rooted in our [psychological safety research](#).



ONE Say “thank you” more often.

Only 55% of employees say they have a formal recognition program. However, those that say they do partake in recognition programs are more likely to feel connected to their organization (+22.3 percentage points), their colleagues (+15.9), and their work. These employees are also more likely to feel like their workload is manageable (+12.6) and are 1.4x more likely to recommend their company to a friend.

To make gratitude a habit, set time aside each week to think about which of your colleagues stepped up to deliver for the business. Then take the time to tell that person you appreciate them – and be specific. With Social Recognition[®], you can forge a culture of appreciation while fueling employee performance, building social bonds, and promoting inclusivity. And these outcomes lead to real ROI for your business.

TWO

Check in with employees more frequently.

Just 49% of employees check in with their manager more than once a week. The more frequently an employee checks in with their manager, the more psychologically safe they feel. Of those respondents who check in with their manager at least weekly, 43% report being highly engaged, compared to only 29% for those not checking in at least weekly.

How check-in frequency and quality impacts psychological safety at work

Psychological safety score (1-5 scale)

		Annually	Quarterly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily
Check-in quality – is it time well spent	Always	3.84	3.92	4.05	4.14	4.05
	Often	3.58	3.61	3.67	3.76	3.74
	Sometimes	3.18	3.23	3.29	3.40	3.47
	Rarely	2.74	2.96	2.91	3.09	3.15
	Never	2.70	2.79	2.66	3.09	3.15

Check-in frequency

Source: “[Thriving in the Next Evolution of Work](#),” Workhuman, 2023



When done right and set up in a regular cadence through Conversations[®], check-ins become an opportunity to build trust and set a foundation of positivity for the manager-employee relationship. Creating a culture where there is comfortable space for conversations about wellbeing is especially important for those who also have statistically lower scores in psychological safety, such as members of underrepresented groups and return-to-office employees. This is a perfect opportunity to get your ERGs involved.



Our ERGs are there to help bring that Be Real value to the forefront to create a culture of belonging. Recognition ties so perfectly into that because we're able to gain support for all of the diverse activities that we lead that are mostly done by our ERGs.

CHRISTINE GRANT
Staff Compensation Analyst
GoTo

Source: "[How Recognition Scales Culture Globally at GoTo](#)," Workhuman, 2023



THREE

Celebrate life events.

Just 54% of employees say their organization celebrates life events outside of work. Those who do work in organizations that celebrate life events have higher psychological safety (3.68/5 vs. 3.27/5), are more likely to recommend the organization to a friend (86% vs. 66%), and are more likely to be highly engaged (43% vs. 28%).

Someone's ability to feel comfortable at work could be as simple as saying "happy birthday" or congratulating them on their newborn baby. Acknowledging and celebrating the things, big or little, we experience outside of work shows we accept and care about each other as humans, not just as coworkers. Bring this into organizational practice through Life Events[®].

At its core, psychological safety is about feeling comfortable bringing your whole human self to work. For employers, it's about empowerment – trusting the humans you've hired to do the jobs they were hired to do, and allowing them to use their voices and show up on their teams.

These three tactics can go a long way in creating an inclusive and psychologically safe environment for your people.

To learn more about promoting psychological safety, get in touch with us directly or visit workhuman.com.

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Or read more on our blog: workhuman.com/blog

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