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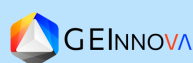


STAY OK

RETHINKING WELLBEING AT WORKPLACES IN
THE EUROPEAN SMES

TRANSNATIONAL RESEARCH REPORT

WWW.STAY-OK-PROJECT.EU



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WE ARE ENTREPRENEURS

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Table of contents

Foreword	<hr/>	04
1. Introduction	<hr/>	05
2. Notes on the methodology	<hr/>	08
3. Workplace wellbeing in micro-enterprises	<hr/>	12
4. Main takeaways	<hr/>	25
References	<hr/>	27
Appendix	<hr/>	28

Foreword

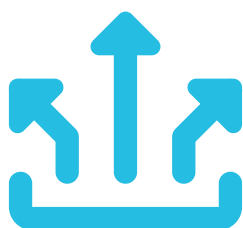
This report forms a component of Work Package 2, "Knowledge Acquisition," within the STAY OK project - Rethinking Wellbeing at Workplaces in EU SMEs, co-funded by the European Union.

The project aims to tackle workplace wellbeing issues, focusing on small businesses in the professional service sector. It seeks to enhance small businesses' appeal in the job market and mitigate the "great resignation" trend.



LEADERSHIP

To achieve these goals, STAY OK plans to create a leadership course covering various topics like career planning, hybrid work, artificial intelligence for human resource management, the removal of technological barriers for workers with disabilities, community wellbeing, and work-life balance.



OUTPUTS

Besides this report, the project will develop outputs such as an innovative training curriculum, a MOOC, a manual for Vocational education and training (VET) providers, and a digital toolkit.



TARGET GROUPS

The project's main target groups include small business leaders, vocational education and training (VET) providers, and business support organizations such as consultancy firms, SME associations, Chambers of Commerce, and others seeking to expand their services in workplace wellbeing.



PARTNERSHIP

STAY OK is managed by six organizations, with EXEO LAB serving as the lead partner. Partner organizations comprise the Maltese Italian Chamber of Commerce (Malta), Munich Business School GmbH (Germany), Gestión Estratégica e Innovación SL (Spain), brainplus GmbH (Austria), and We Are Entrepreneurs (Denmark).

1.Introduction

How do you decide whether to work for a large company, a small business or for yourself? Odds are that you will look for the option that best supports your well-being and avoid a workplace that can harm your **happiness, health, relationships, or financial security**.* Additionally, your decision will likely involve making trade-offs among these different dimensions of well-being.

If you live in Europe, chances are high that you will either work for or even lead a small business at some point in your life. This is because the continent's 23 million micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs)** contribute to approximately three-quarters of total employment and constitute about 99% of all firms.[1] It comes as no surprise that MSMEs are frequently regarded as the backbone of the European economy.

Work-related stress in MSMEs is hardly anything new of course - and can stem from a myriad of sources that range from internal organizational dynamics to external industry pressures.

This is especially true for professional service firms, where value primarily stems from intellectual efforts through the work of managers and employees in close cooperation with their clients[2], and where professionals encounter stringent deadlines and operate within demanding work schedules, often exceeding 65 hours per week.[3]

For example, a focused study[4] on leaders within French small and medium-sized IT and technological service enterprises brings to light specific stressors such as work organization, project deadlines, rapid technological changes, and the constant need for innovation. These stressors not only strain the mental health of employees but also challenge the manager's ability to maintain a productive and positive workplace environment as well as directly affecting small business owners' strain.[5]

Additionally, new forms of work introduced from the digital transformation and advent of remote, mobile and hybrid models in most businesses pose additional challenges and opportunities for managing psychosocial risks in the workplace.[6]

The acceleration of digital processes requires MSMEs to navigate the complexities of maintaining team cohesion, managing work-life boundaries, and ensuring that employees remain engaged and motivated despite the physical distance that may exist between them and their managers.[4]

However, according to research, small-scale enterprises rarely participate in structured well-being promotion due to a **lack of resources, motivation, communication channels**, in-house health expertise, and convincing evidence of the benefits of workplace health initiatives.[7]

On a similar note, a recent study[8] argued that, perhaps not surprisingly, small businesses often have limited financial resources and dedicated staff for addressing mental health issues. This in turn might hinder their ability to provide comprehensive wellbeing support programs that larger corporations may offer.

Research shows that approaches that rely solely on expert advice or focus narrowly on specific problems, which are typical in MSMEs, are less effective at improving mental and social health aspects compared to more holistic workplace wellbeing interventions involving both managers and employees in a wide-ranging manner.[9]

Similarly, scholars[10] demonstrate that while well-being interventions aimed at organizational changes typically benefit the organization as a whole, individual-focused interventions frequently fall short of having a meaningfully positive impact on the entire organization.

But are small businesses truly incompatible with effective wellbeing practices? Some researchers[11] argue that MSMEs are actually better positioned in creating an ideal setting for both managers and employees to engage in health promotion activities. More specifically, small businesses are particularly well-suited for carrying out wellbeing programs because of their straightforward organizational structures, easy access to information, and effective direct communication.[12]

These organizational aspects support the solving of work-related problems through casual conversations and a positive work environment, fostering the participatory spirit deemed as essential for effective workplace wellbeing. This engagement is crucial for the success of health initiatives in the workplace and benefits from the informal way in which micro-firms often operate.[13] Furthermore, informal workplace relationships in MSMEs could allow greater flexibility in responding to **mental health issues**. [8]

While this sounds promising, we are yet to establish what well-being in small firms looks like, what specific challenges managers face and how they address them. The thing is that much has been written about well-being. However, a great deal of the focus has been directed towards analyzing the impact of working conditions on the health and well-being of employees in large enterprises. Much less is written on SMEs and their managers.[14] So far, SMEs and micro-enterprises have been taken together. Therefore, we could not find any direct evidence available from micro-enterprises specifically, which could constitute a distinct area of research.[15] Moreover, adopting a comparative perspective would significantly enhance our understanding of the diversity of European businesses and their approaches to addressing well-being concerns.[8]

It is this backdrop that provides for the subject of this report. The latter is designed to offer an overview of the sources of information that managers in micro-enterprises within the professional service sector rely on when it comes to workplace well-being, the challenges they face in managing their own well-being and that of their employees, and the practices implemented.

The main ideas presented in this work are based on the following sources. The core of this report relies on primary research, namely **121 interviews*** with managers of micro-enterprises within the professional service sector across six European countries (**Austria, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Malta, and Spain**).



During the primary data collection phase, we also found three excellent examples of best practices implemented to promote well-being in the workplace. We decided to complement this evidence with an additional seven examples of best practices identified through secondary research including SMEs and non-European organizations. Consequently, we opted to intersperse the **ten “Cases of Excellence”** throughout the text, providing readers with valuable learning opportunities.

After engaging in discussions with expert panelists on workplace well-being during an **international webinar** held on **April 24, 2024** (refer to Figure 1), we revisited our preliminary findings and extracted the main takeaways. The insights gathered from this report and its ensuing discussion will form the basis of a Vocational Training and Education (VET) curriculum for managers of MSMEs as well as a related Massive Open Online Course (MOOC).



Figure 1: Poster for the promotion of STAY OK international webinar

2. Notes on the methodology

Dr. Schmidt's interrogation

In a secure interrogation room at the police station, Detective Alvarez, assigned to investigate a high-profile corporate espionage case with international implications, questioned Dr. Melora Schmidt, a renowned data analyst. Suspecting Dr. Schmidt's expertise could offer crucial insights into the case, Detective Alvarez sought answers.

Detective Alvarez: Sit down, Dr. Schmidt. (clearing his throat, his deep voice resonating in the room) Let's get started.

Detective Alvarez: So, Dr. Schmidt, do all research reports have to be as dry as a desert?

Dr. Schmidt: (chuckles) Not necessarily, Detective.

Detective Alvarez: (smirks) Well, I'm glad we're on the same page then ... Tell me about this research you're working on.

Dr. Schmidt: We developed a research design based on multi-modal data gathering[16], following ...

Detective Alvarez: (raises an eyebrow) Let me stop you right there ... Multi-modal data gathering?

Dr. Schmidt: Essentially, we had a lead researcher based in Germany, myself, and collaborators in five other countries conducting primary data collection through synchronous and asynchronous interviews with 121 managers of micro-enterprises, mostly in their local languages.

Detective Alvarez: Could you clarify what you mean by synchronous and asynchronous interviews?

Dr. Schmidt: Sure, Detective. Synchronous interviews were conducted either in person, over the phone, or via video conferencing tools like Zoom, Skype, or Microsoft Teams. Asynchronous interviews, on the other hand, involved sending questions to our informants via email, allowing them to respond at their convenience.

Detective Alvarez: So, in which countries did you and the collaborators gather the data?

Dr. Schmidt: Austria, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Malta, and Spain (counts off each country on her fingers as she lists them).

Detective Alvarez: Ah, good old Europe (he gazes off into the distance, lost in thought for a moment, before returning his focus to Dr. Schmidt) ... Did you keep a record of how many interviews were done in each country, and which type they were?

Dr. Schmidt: (taken aback, she quickly pulls out a rumpled and stained sheet of paper, Figure 2, from her right pocket and slides it across the table of the interrogation room).

Type of interview Country ↓	→ (in-person)	Synchronous (telephone)	(video telephony)	Asynchronous (email)	Total
Austria	0	6	0	16	22
Denmark	2	0	0	18	20
Germany	1	0	18	2	21
Italy	0	9	13	1	23
Malta	3	0	0	13	16
Spain	0	18	1	0	19
<u>Total</u>	6	33	32	50	(121)

Figure 2: Summary of interviews conducted

Detective Alvarez: (glancing at the paper) I see ... And how many times did you interview each manager?

Dr. Schmidt: Just once.

Detective Alvarez: You understand that I'll require you to provide evidence regarding the materials utilized for the interviews.

Dr. Schmidt: (smiles, taking a folder out of her bag) Yes, I came prepared. The interview schedule, or script as you might call it, can be found in the Appendix.

Detective Alvarez: Got it. (tapping his fingers against his mustache) ... When did the interviews occur exactly?

Dr. Schmidt: I believe it was in ... Between December 2023 and March 2024.

Detective Alvarez: Multi-modal data gathering, huh? So, how did you manage to pull that off?

Dr. Schmidt: Well, the collaborators and I reported the data collected through the interviews in English, using written replies, notes, or transcripts and translations of recordings from the interviews. For this purpose, I set up an online survey with open- and close-ended questions to streamline the process.

Detective Alvarez: So, you're telling me you gathered data from all over the place, but it all ended up centralized through this online survey that you and your collaborators filled out, and it landed on your desk? "That's correct, Detective," said **Dr. Schmidt**

Detective Alvarez: 121 interviews ... How'd you make sense of it all?

Dr. Schmidt: I first transferred the responses reported by myself and the collaborators for each informant into separate data files, each in a Word document, to be exact.

Detective Alvarez: This process alone must've taken quite a bit of time, didn't it?

Dr. Schmidt: (sighs) It sure did.

Detective Alvarez: What happened next?

Dr. Schmidt: I then used structural coding [17] for data analysis, which is appropriate for open-ended questions.[18] Each interview question and its probes were assigned a code, which we applied to the response text in each data file. It allowed us to organize and analyze the data systematically, capturing key themes and categories across the entire dataset.

Detective Alvarez: (with a skeptical look) So, what about the answers to those close-ended questions? Did you just ignore them?

Dr. Schmidt: (with a slight blush) Oh, I didn't realize you needed that much detail.

Detective Alvarez: What were they about, anyway?

Dr. Schmidt: The close-ended questions were about collecting data on the informants' gender, age, size of the enterprise, industry, and sector.

Detective Alvarez: That's some interesting info you've got. It's definitely gonna be useful for the investigation.

Dr. Schmidt: Yeah, it's right there in Table 1 (points at the folder she gave Detective Alvarez a few minutes earlier).

Detective Alvarez: (finally opens the folder to check its content) I'll look into these files later. So, what did you do with this data?

Dr. Schmidt: Using mixed methods, I examined the code frequencies within the qualitative data and tried to link them to these variables to see if certain themes were more common in specific sample segments.

Detective Alvarez: Alright (taps the table to signal the end of the interrogation) ... Thanks for the insight, Dr. Schmidt.

Dr. Schmidt: (stands up to shake his hand) You're welcome, Detective.

Post-interview reflection

As Detective Alvarez reviewed the transcript of his conversation with Dr. Schmidt, he couldn't shake the feeling that this interrogation was a missing piece of the puzzle in unraveling the mystery behind the case he was investigating. Opening Dr. Schmidt's folder, he skimmed through Table 1 with his index fingers. With a newfound sense of purpose, he resolved to dive deeper into the research report findings and follow any leads that might emerge.

Table 1: Summary of informants and their micro-enterprises

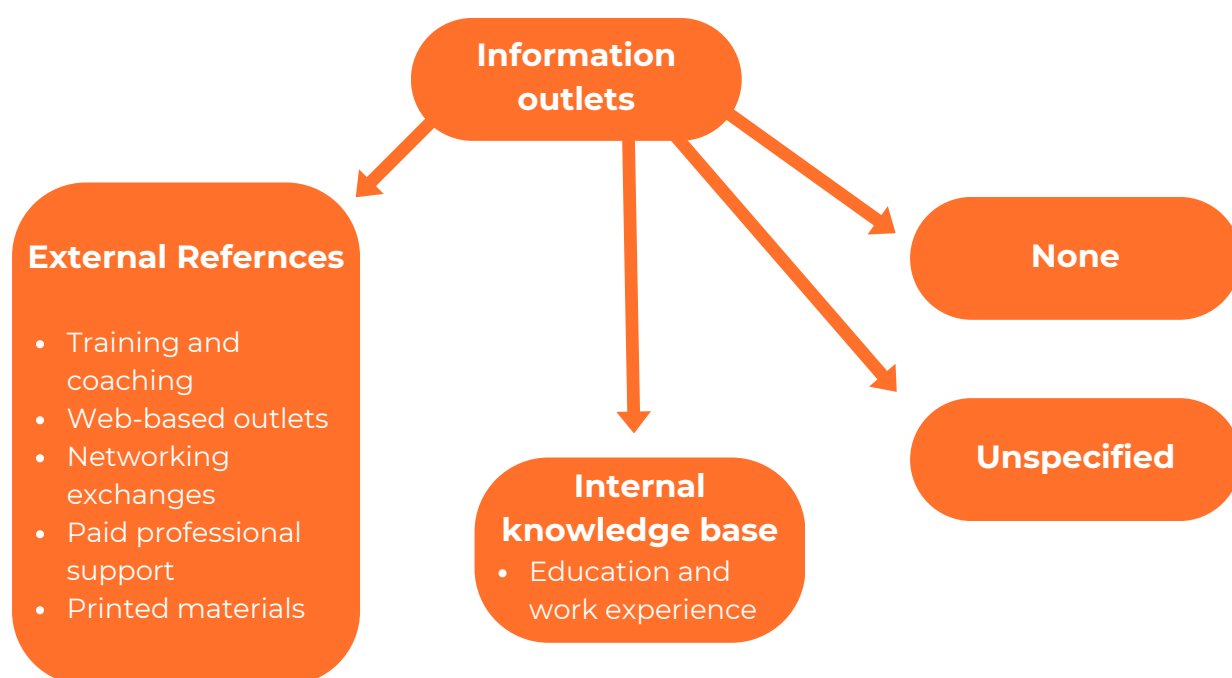
Variables	Frequency	Percentage	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Country			Gender		
Austria	22	18.18	Female	62	51.24
Denmark	20	16.53	Male	59	48.76
Germany	21	17.36	Total	121	100.00
Italy	23	19.01	Age		
Malta	16	13.22	Young adults (<40 years old)	31	25.62
Spain	19	15.70	Middle-aged (40-59 years old)	64	52.89
Total	121	100.00	Older adults (>59 years old)	10	8.26
Sector			N/A	16	13.22
Private for profit	99	81.82	Total	121	100.00
NGO	14	11.57	Industry		
Other	8	6.61	Advertising, marketing and communication services	12	9.92
Total	121	100.00	Consultancy (not specified)	21	17.36
Size			E-commerce	1	0.83
1	18	14.88	Education, training and research	18	14.88
2	21	17.36	Finance consulting	2	1.65
3	12	9.92	Financial services	8	6.61
4	15	12.40	Healthcare consulting	1	0.83
5	18	14.88	Human resources and staffing services	2	1.65
6	8	6.61	IT consulting	6	4.96
7	5	4.13	Information technology services	4	3.31
8	6	4.96	Management and business consulting	9	7.44
9	1	0.83	Social, environmental and cultural services	13	10.74
10	17	14.05	N/A	24	19.83
Total	121	100.00	Total	121	100.00

3. Workplace wellbeing in micro-enterprises

3.1 Information outlets

Where do managers of micro-enterprises source information on workplace wellbeing? According to the data we gathered, information outlets assisting managers and guiding their decisions on workplace wellbeing are mainly twofold: external references and internal knowledge base.

Figure 3: Information outlets categories and sub-categories



Predominantly, **external references** hold sway, with 64 informants (58%) turning to varied external outlets for insights. Among these, training and coaching sessions stand out being mentioned by 30 informants (27%), predominantly female managers within the private for-profit sector and more commonly embraced in Denmark and Italy, with less prevalence in Spain and Germany.

Web-based outlets, including podcasts, blogs, and other online resources, constitute another significant source, cited by 21 managers (19%). While this approach gains little ground in Germany and goes unnoticed by managers in Malta, it enjoys widespread adoption in Austria.

Networking exchanges emerge as a vital conduit of information, acknowledged by 18

participants (16%), with a notable inclination among women. In practical terms, these are discussions and informal talks with other professionals, family and friends, unpaid mentors and advisors and, in one case, the employees themselves.

SKYLABS

offers digital strategy, IT consulting and system integration services for private companies and public entities. In light of widespread dissatisfaction stemming from recent economic crises, the company has chosen to prioritize the mental and physical health of its employees. They are recognized as the primary asset essential for expanding, and maintaining market share.



ITALY



51-200 EMPLOYEES



CONSULTANCY
(DIGITAL AND IT)



HIGHLIGHT:
REMARKABLY INNOVATIVE

WORKPLACE WELLBEING BEST PRACTICES

Skylabs offers its employees a range of benefits including smart working, flexible hours, continuous training, and certification paths. Moreover, the organization highly regards the active participation of its employees in shaping decisions pertaining to workplace wellbeing. One of the innovative best practices adopted is an internal contest called 'Call For Benefit', where over 100 employees share ideas for implementing corporate welfare. The three prizes awarded are: immediate adoption of the winning project, direct involvement in company decisions, and a monetary reward based on podium placement. In 2022, the winning idea was a one-month paid sabbatical for employees reaching their sixth year, followed by monthly lunches with a chef and dream location smart working.



SOURCES

Forbes.it. (2022, July 26). La persona al centro dell'innovazione digitale: Il paradigma di skylabs. [The person at the center of digital innovation: The skylabs paradigm]. <https://forbes.it/2022/07/26/la-persona-al-centro-dellinnovazione-digitale-il-paradigma-di-skylabs/>

People & Change 360. (2022, July 22). Il periodo sabbatico diventa benefit aziendale, ed è anche pagato. [Sabbatical becomes company benefit, and it's paid too]. <https://www.peoplechange360.it/people-strategy/people-engagement/periodo-sabbatico-benefit-aziendale-pagato/>

A subset of managers (10 individuals, 9%) opt for paid professional support, engaging external HR consultants and psychologists. This avenue is notably absent in both Germany and Malta and is only to be found within the private for-profit sector, likely due to the associated costs.

Printed materials, such as books and magazines, are referenced by seven respondents (6%). Yet, amid the stereotyping, this preference is more common among young adults and was only mentioned within enterprises with fewer than five employees.

While external references were cited most frequently, 11 individuals (10%) drew upon their **internal knowledge base**—specifically, their education and work experience—when asked about information sources, predominantly men and older adults. This trend finds greater resonance in Germany and Malta.

Lastly, six managers (5%) refer to **unspecified sources** and four (4%) admit to relying on **none** at all.

3.2 Challenges

What sorts of difficulties do managers face when managing workplace wellbeing in micro-enterprises? We have talked about the use of different outlets to draw insights, but this is inevitably tangled up with the types of challenges managers encounter. A number of points were made by our informants—within this context, three types of challenges emerge.

Figure 4: *Challenges categories and sub-categories*



At the macro-level, about one-third of managers (36 people, 33%) referred to **instrumental barriers** citing systemic obstacles beyond their control as hindrances to progress on wellbeing in their enterprises. In this context, *economic constraints* revolve around the costs associated with enhancing workplace wellbeing, such as securing well-equipped office spaces in prime locations, a particularly prohibitive endeavor in big urban centers. Instrumental barriers also include the limited resources available (such as time and finances), the enterprise's fluctuating revenues and, in one case, the low bargaining power of solo-entrepreneurs when negotiating with powerful clients.

Not surprisingly, economic constraints were particularly prevalent in NGOs. They were mentioned by 11 managers (8%).

ISGS

DREHSCHIEBE

is an NGO located in the village of Kapfenberg (Austria), providing diverse social and health-promoting services such as community nursing, mediation, and family support. With a small team, they cater to the needs of the local community in Styria.



AUSTRIA



1-10 EMPLOYEES



MEDIATION AND
SOCIAL SUPPORT



HIGHLIGHT:

REMARKABLY EFFICIENT

WORKPLACE WELLBEING BEST PRACTICES

ISGS staff are granted complimentary access to a variety of services typically provided by the organization for a fee to the community. These services span physical activities such as chair yoga and qigong, as well as mental wellbeing workshops on diverse topics such as nutrition, parenting, memory, and social events. Approval is required for staff participation, and engagement is restricted to leisure hours, ensuring activities are undertaken outside of regular work commitments. This offering not only supports the workplace wellbeing of ISGS employees but also fosters a positive workplace culture that values employee health and engagement, all while being mindful of the NGO's budget constraints.



SOURCES

W. Schabereiter, Email on workplace wellbeing at Integrierter Sozial- und Gesundheitssprengel (ISGS) Drehscheibe to G. Parola, February 26, 2024.

13 of our informants (12%) also referred to *environmental deficiencies* as instrumental barriers when managing wellbeing in their micro-enterprises. These encompass legislative confusion, bureaucratic red tape, and the adverse impact of economic downturns on employees' wellbeing. Additionally, some managers mentioned the remote office locations and unsuitable historic buildings, compounding these challenges. These issues are further exacerbated by a lack of support and practical training available, notably affecting expat entrepreneurs. Environmental deficiencies appeared to have the most pronounced impact on managers in Italy and Spain.

Finally, *socio-cultural aspects* emerge as an additional type of instrumental barrier with four managers (4%) across Austria and Denmark highlighting pervasive issues such as the lack of awareness surrounding workplace wellbeing, mental health stigma, and the prevalence of hour-centric work cultures.

Transitioning to the organizational level, there is a paradox that, even as wellbeing becomes ubiquitous in our professional lives, the efforts made by managers in supporting and scaling it meant other organizational priorities would falter, due to **contradictory organizational demands**. This challenge was reported by 32 managers (30%) during the interviews. The most common contradictory demand mentioned by almost half in this group (13 informants, 12%) were struggles associated to *supporting employee wellbeing while meeting the operational demands* of the enterprise, especially in terms of deadlines and rapport with clients as well as maintaining employees right to privacy.


Additionally, 10 managers (9%) encountered difficulties in extending flexibility through remote work or flexible hours, while trying to establish a clearly defined organizational identity and maintain structure within the firm. A smaller number of managers (four informants, 4%) mentioned tension caused by scaling wellbeing practices across teams while providing tailored solutions based on individual needs and generational differences. Finally, three managers (3%) referred to contradictions in defining professional and personal boundaries when working with friends and family, a common situation in micro-enterprises.

The third type of challenge emphasized by the managers interviewed (64 informants, 44%) reflects obstacles faced at the individual level in the form of **psychological hurdles**. These include both the *employee strain and shortcomings* as well as the *employer burden*. In a sense, since we talked to managers, it comes as no surprise that they shared more insights on the latter and less on the former. Drawing on the interviews, the employer burden category refers to the toll on the informants' wellbeing amidst the rigors of managing a micro-enterprise. Employer burden was described by 32 managers (29%) in terms of work-life balance issues, stress, depression, and burnout resulting from overload, extended working hours, and time management challenges. Conflicts among employees, loneliness (particularly for solo-entrepreneurs), and uncertainty about managing the enterprise were also highlighted.


Employee strain and shortcomings affecting workplace wellbeing were mentioned less frequently but still identified as challenges by 12 of our informants (11%). These included episodes of depression and burnout among employees, often linked to overload, loneliness due to remote work, lack of confidence, anxiety, and time management difficulties.

SKLAR WILTON & ASSOC.


is a strategy and insights advisory firm assisting businesses to drive growth and enhance brand strength. The team consists of experienced marketing advisors, insight professionals, facilitators who genuinely like hanging out together and collaborate to provide solutions.




CANADA



11-50 EMPLOYEES




CONSULTANCY
(BRAND AND RETAIL)



HIGHLIGHT:
REMARKABLY EFFECTIVE

WORKPLACE WELLBEING BEST PRACTICES

The passing of the founder Luke Sklar through suicide in 2018 profoundly impacted the organization. To honor Luke's memory, the enterprise prioritized mental health, restructuring the benefits plan to meet diverse needs. This included introducing a healthcare spending account, an employee assistance program, a personal spending account, and transitioning to a fully flexible workplace model. They also developed a comprehensive mental health plan and effective training methods. Initiatives supporting personal and professional growth include the Whole Person Development Program, Biannual Offsite Retreats, and On-the-Spot and Milestones Rewards. These efforts led to tangible improvements in annual employee engagement survey outcomes over the past years.



SOURCES

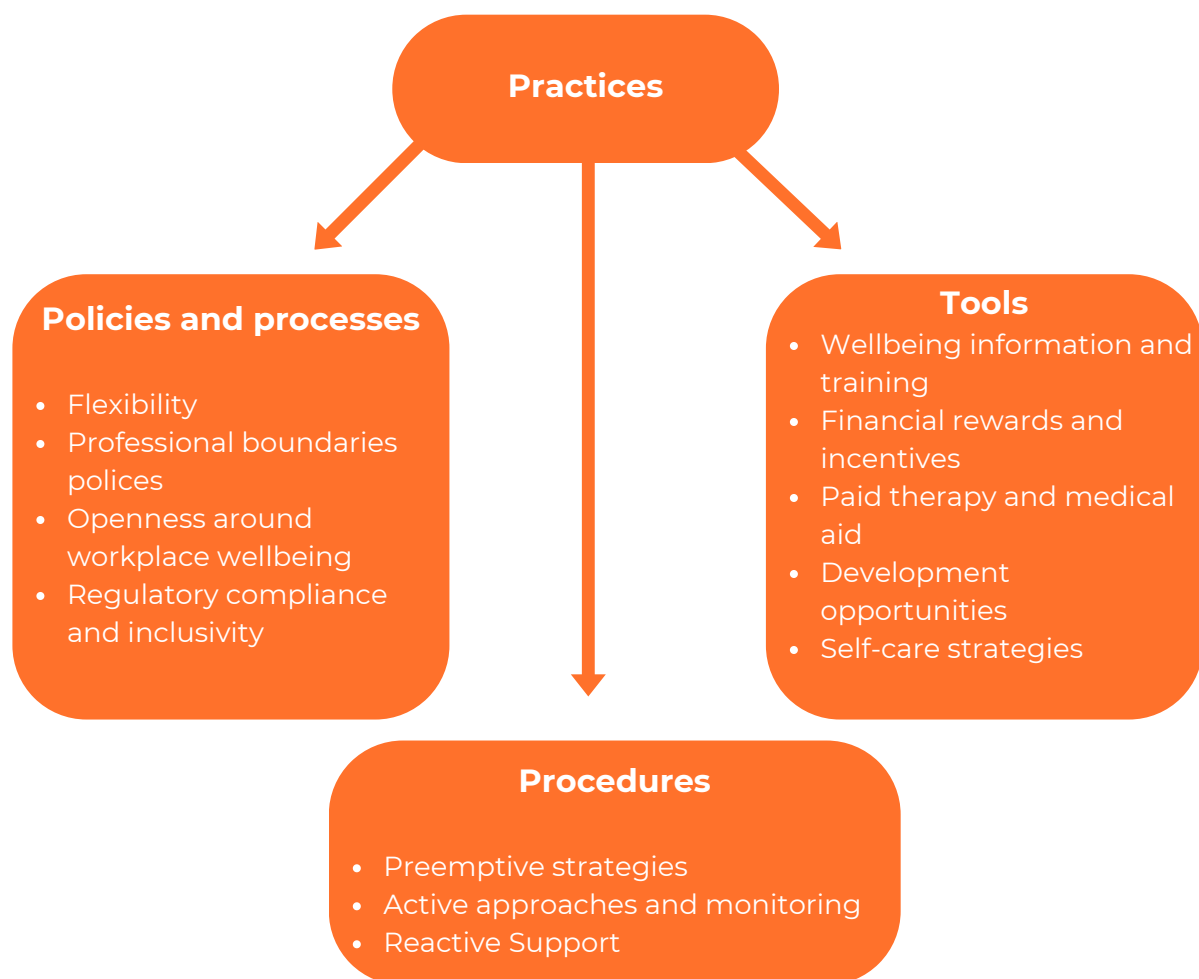
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Fit + Healthy 365 . (2018, May 11). Best practices for creating a worldclass employee wellness program.
<https://www.fithealthy365.com/best-practices-for-creating-a-worldclass-employee-wellness-program/>
Mental Health Research Canada. (2022, January 26). Let's talk workplace wellness on Bell Let's Talk Day.
<https://www.mhrc.ca/lets-talk-workplace-wellness>

Managers striving to introduce wellbeing practices to tackle these and other challenges occasionally encountered employee passivity or outright resistance, which they perceived as a hindrance in itself.

3.3 Practices: Wellbeing in action

What workplace wellbeing practices do managers of micro-enterprises implement? Our data unveiled a scattergun of applications, as the insights from the managers we interviewed articulated a variety of practices. These practices, which we delineate in the subsequent paragraphs, encompass policies and processes, procedures, and tools.

Figure 5: *Practices categories and sub-categories*



3.3.1 Policies and processes

The overwhelming majority of entrepreneurs interviewed (92 informants, 84%) indicated the presence of structured **policies and processes** aimed at fostering workplace wellbeing in their micro-enterprises. Policies, in this context, delineate established guidelines, usually applied to all employees, that outline work processes, encapsulating the conceptual flow of work.

The predominant policy was flexibility, noted by 73 informants (66%), which manifests in processes such as offering **flexible working hours**, adopting performance-driven approaches founded on trust and autonomy, juxtaposed against the rigidities of hour-centric work cultures, provision of remote, mobile or **hybrid work modalities**, and **accommodating leave arrangements** as necessary. Flexibility policies appeared to be emblematic of smaller micro-enterprises (five employees or fewer).

Professional boundary policies, raised by 19 informants (17%), diverged in two directions. Firstly, delineating processes that establish boundaries within the workplace, aiming to preserve work-life balance by defining limits on working hours, selecting projects with reputable clients to safeguard employee wellbeing, and recognizing the constraints in managers' responsibilities when engaging with freelancers. Secondly, these policies also included processes to break down boundaries, particularly within the manager-employee relationship. More specifically, managers emphasize fostering processes characterized by shared decision-making, high transparency, and minimal to no hierarchy, a model some informants even referred to as "participatory management." Our interviewees explained that a participatory management style can foster employee well-being by promoting inclusivity, collaboration, and a sense of ownership, which in turn can lead to increased job satisfaction and morale.

HATMILL

is made up of a team of over 45 supply chain and logistics specialists. As a 'teal' organization, it operates on principles of self-organization and self-management, where employees take responsibility for their governance and interpersonal interactions. They eschew traditional job titles and hierarchical structures, opting instead for fluid roles and project-based self-selection.



UNITED KINGDOM



11-50 EMPLOYEES



CONSULTANCY
(SUPPLY CHAIN AND LOGISTICS)



HIGHLIGHT:
REMARKABLY INNOVATIVE

WORKPLACE WELLBEING BEST PRACTICES

In 2021, Hatmill underwent a significant transition to an employee-owned model, marking a pivotal moment for the team. Founder Simon Dixon transferred 100% of shares to an Employee-owned Trust (EOT), ensuring that employees now share in the financial success of the business. This transition also allows employees to benefit from future company achievements and from the proceeds of share transfers triggered by a longstanding Employee Management Incentive (EMI) scheme. Despite the change in ownership structure, Hatmill's unique operating model and culture remain unchanged and the organization maintains its 'teal' approach, characterized by a non-hierarchical structure that empowers employees to address challenges directly.



SOURCES

Careers. Hatmill. (n.d.). <https://hatmill.com/about-us/careers/>
The Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport. (2021, April 30). Hatmill becomes employee-owned. <https://ciltuk.org.uk/News/Latest-News/ArtMID/6887/ArticleID/34804/Hatmill-becomes-employee-owned>

These policies were notably prevalent in micro-enterprises where managers likened the environment to a familial setting, often working alongside friends. Professional boundaries policies were more prevalent among managers in Germany and Italy,

particularly among young and middle-aged managers, and naturally did not pertain to one-person enterprises.

An additional noteworthy policy was the emphasis on **openness around workplace well-being**, cited by 14 informants (13%). This policy influenced processes like establishing communication channels between managers and employees concerning wellbeing issues. Within this context, a manager described their role as that of “lending a listening ear,” involving actively listening to employees as issues arise.

Furthermore, managers mentioned openly addressing mental health stigma in the workplace. Notably, openness policies were more prevalent in Austria and were associated more commonly with middle-aged and older adults compared to their younger counterparts.

Regulatory compliance and **inclusivity policies** were referenced by eight managers (7%). These encompass adherence to national regulations concerning workplace wellbeing, alongside initiatives to advance inclusivity through the implementation of gender equality plans, prioritization of the employment of women and working mothers, and, in one instance, accommodating persons with disabilities. Regulatory compliance and inclusivity policies were not mentioned by informants in Malta and Spain and were more frequently highlighted by middle-aged and older adults.

3.3.2 Procedures

Procedures encompass a more concrete and specific set of activities aimed at implementing processes established by the micro-enterprise's policies. In our study, procedures emerged as a focal point, mentioned by 37 informants, constituting 34% of the total responses. These procedures include preemptive strategies, active approaches and monitoring, as well as reactive support measures.

Preemptive strategies focus on gaining sustainable advantages by enhancing workplace wellbeing proactively, even before wellbeing issues manifest. This proactive stance not only fosters a healthier work environment but also cultivates a motivated workforce. Among the respondents, **preemptive strategies** were the most commonly cited procedures, mentioned by 22 informants (20%).

They frequently involve actively encouraging proactivity in wellbeing practices through verbal communication, organizing spontaneous social activities such as informal meetings outside the office or impromptu gatherings some of the managers referred to as “staff room moments,” often over a morning coffee.

Additionally, some managers plan social activities in advance for their employees, including team-building sessions, hiking trips, city tours, game nights, concerts, and parties to facilitate team bonding.

Always within this category, strategic recruitment practices entail a thorough assessment of a potential employees' alignment with the organizational identity, thus contributing to improved workplace wellbeing by ensuring a cultural fit and promoting a sense of belonging among team members. Preemptive strategies were notably more prevalent in Germany and slightly favored by female managers.

PENDULA

develops customer engagement technology. The organization enables teams to provide dynamic and meaningful two-way customer interactions to inspire, engage, and retain customers on a large scale. They offer flexible work arrangements, supporting remote, hybrid, and international work settings, empowering employees to work where and when they prefer.



AUSTRALIA



11-50 EMPLOYEES



SOFTWARE
DEVELOPMENT



HIGHLIGHT:

REMARKABLY EFFECTIVE

WORKPLACE WELLBEING BEST PRACTICES

Despite embracing a fully hybrid working model across all office hubs, Pendula places a strong emphasis on team bonding. Under the guidance of Experience Manager Amanda Baillie, a new wellness benefit was introduced in 2022, allowing each employee to select a wellbeing activity of their choice. Expanding on this initiative, Pendula now offers monthly team activities such as in-office yoga, meditation, and massages in collaboration with a local self-care provider. This program not only fosters valuable face-to-face interaction but also received positive feedback from employees, resulting in a relaxed and significantly energized atmosphere, contributing to Pendula's fifth-place ranking at Australia's Best Workplaces™ 2023 SMALL.



SOURCES

Blys. (2023, January 19). The 15-minute activity that kickstarted Pendula's workplace wellbeing program. <https://getblys.com.au/blog/pendula-customer-story/>
Great Place To Work® Institute. (n.d.). Australia's best workplace™ 2023 SMALL. <https://greatplacetowork.com.au/awards-list/australia-best-workplaces-2023-small-companies/>

KAÏBEE

Kaibee is an IT consulting firm that supports IT talents' careers with a pragmatic, crafty, agile, and meritocratic approach. The organization encourages everyone to contribute to its success in various roles. This process fosters a real pact of trust with employees, unlocking their present and future potential and integrating their career aspirations within Kaibee's framework.



FRANCE



51-200 EMPLOYEES



CONSULTANCY (IT)



HIGHLIGHT:

REMARKABLY TAILORED

WORKPLACE WELLBEING BEST PRACTICES

At Kaibee, employees are recruited based on their profile rather than their future tasks to establish trust. An onboarding schedule ensures each Kaiber is the only 'newcomer' for at least two weeks, allowing for a thorough welcome and alignment of expectations. Proactive engagement begins well before the employment contract starts, often with a first onboarding day held weeks or months in advance. During this process, each Kaiber receives event invitations, a personalized welcome and the chance to film a short video produced and edited by a professionals to present their personality to the future team. Any pre-employment time invested by a Kaiber is compensated with additional leave. The organization wellbeing efforts pay off with a stellar 4.9/5 employee rating on Glassdoor.




SOURCES

Glassdoor. (n.d.). Working at Kaibee. https://www.glassdoor.com/Overview/Working-at-Kaibee-EI_IE1560321_11_17.htm
Kaibee. (2020, November 25). L'intégration à Kaibee : Welcome aboard! [Integration at Kaibee: Welcome aboard!]. <https://kaibee.fr/lintegration-a-kaibee-welcome-aboard/>


Active approaches and monitoring, mentioned by 19 informants (17%) in our conversations, represent another key procedure employed by managers to instill wellbeing practices within micro-enterprises and involve providing their organizations with feedback mechanisms. It is worth noting that these practices are not used by solo-entrepreneurs. To better understand wellbeing at their workplace, managers used regular meetings held on a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly basis. In one case, these procedures included an in-house assessment conducted by external consultants on wellbeing topics.

CUEIM


is a university network that places at the center of its mission the commitment to disseminate academic managerial knowledge and skills in support of the socioeconomic development processes for a sustainable future. The non-profit operates from four offices, it advocates for flexible and remote work options, along with ensuring employees' right to disconnect.




ITALY



11-50 EMPLOYEES




RESEARCH



HIGHLIGHT:
REMARKABLY TAILORED

WORKPLACE WELLBEING BEST PRACTICES

In acknowledging the unique psychological and motivational profiles of its employees, in 2017, the organization partnered with a DISC provider for behavioral assessments aimed at enhancing workplace communication, teamwork, and productivity. The latter partly informed personalized approaches tailored to individual psychological profiles, which characterize the organization. In addition to hosting an annual training session on workplace wellbeing, CUEIM has assigned a dedicated staff member to address cross-cutting issues around wellbeing through bilateral reviews with employees to ensure ongoing support and launched "The Good Business Academy," an initiative educating business owners on creating positive impacts on their stakeholders, primarily their employees.



SOURCES

Consorzio Universitario di Economia Industriale e Manageriale (CUEIM). (n.d.). About us. <https://www.cueim.org/>
G. Zarlenga, Interview on workplace wellbeing at CUEIM by V. Lavano, January 19, 2024.

Finally, celebrating employee successes were highlighted as a way to actively promote wellbeing in the workplace. Active approaches and monitoring were particularly common in Germany, while not reported in Malta.

Reactive support measures for wellbeing issues were mentioned by nine managers (8%). These procedures come into play after a wellbeing issue is identified by the manager or raised by employees. When looking more closely, these include tailored solutions, on-demand bilateral meetings, and reallocation of work responsibilities.

Interestingly, reactive support procedures were not mentioned in Malta and Spain and were more frequently cited by middle-aged managers.

BESONDERS SEIN

is a digital marketing agency deeply committed to employer branding and New Work. They are characterized by skilled leadership, marketing expertise, and design, encouraging individuals to embrace uniqueness and combine appreciation, profit, and meaning.



GERMANY



11-50 EMPLOYEES



ADVERTISING AND MARKETING



HIGHLIGHT:

REMARKABLY EFFICIENT

WORKPLACE WELLBEING BEST PRACTICES

Since 2015, Managing Director Daniela Köhler has led a weekly 'success meeting', embodying the company's ethos. Psychologists highlight the enduring impact of acknowledging successes and expressing gratitude on individual satisfaction. Therefore, every Wednesday, Daniela invites employees to lunch to celebrate both minor and major triumphs, fostering collective agency development. Despite initial skepticism, employees now perceive successes as genuine achievements, contributing to improved work quality and confidence. The Wednesday team meeting has become a routine, with everyone readily identifying successes within a weekly timeframe. This proactive approach also averts latent employee dissatisfaction.



SOURCES

Besonders Sein. (2023, October 23). Warum unser Teammeeting besonders ist | Erfolgsmeeting. [Why our team meeting is special | Success meeting]. <https://besonders-sein.de/besonders-sein-insights-warum-unser-teammeeting-besonders-ist/>

3.3.3 Tools

On a more tangible level, in our exploratory interviews, a spectrum of tools emerged, illustrating the diverse resources and instruments deployed by managers in their pursuit of enhanced workplace wellbeing.

Firstly, 18 managers (16% of our informants) shared offering **wellbeing information and training to employees**. This encompassed initiatives such as wellbeing awareness training and education on effective time and stress management techniques.

Additionally, 16 managers (15% of the total) highlighted the provision of *financial rewards and incentives* as a key component of their workplace wellbeing initiatives.

This category spanned a wide array of offerings, ranging from attractive compensation packages and productivity incentives to spontaneous gifts and the provision of well-equipped office spaces. Notably, one manager went above and beyond by providing access to a fitness room as part of their workplace amenities. Moreover, wellness programs, extra budget for employees' further education, gym membership passes, and transport subsidies were included in this category to further support employees' overall wellbeing.

A smaller subset of managers (six informants, 6%) addressed mental health concerns by offering **paid therapy or medical aid** to employees. This involved direct engagement with psychologists or professional agencies, alongside initiatives such as extra mental health leave and in-house counselling services. Additionally, a select few managers (three informants, 3%) in Austria, Germany, and Malta, operating in information technology services and finance consulting, reported providing *development opportunities* to their employees. These opportunities ranged from informal career advice to comprehensive mentoring programs and business coaching sessions.

Lastly, three middle-aged managers (3%) from Austria, Denmark, and Germany shared their personal adoption of **self-care strategies** as a means to enhance their own wellbeing. These strategies included taking regular holidays, practicing meditation, and engaging in physical activities such as sports.

ENGINUITY

Enginuity is an NGO committed to discovering innovative methods for addressing skills gaps within UK engineering and manufacturing. With a fully remote workforce, the company recognizes the challenges of working from home. Therefore, it prioritizes the physical, mental, and social wellbeing of its employees, using a proactive and preventative approach.



UNITED KINGDOM



51-200 EMPLOYEES



EDUCATION AND TRAINING



HIGHLIGHT:
REMARKABLY HOLISTIC

WORKPLACE WELLBEING BEST PRACTICES

Enginuity's workplace wellbeing program includes mental health first aiders who offer confidential support and guidance, an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) offering 24-hour confidential advice and free counseling for employees and their families. The organization also grants entry to a wellbeing portal and interactive app for accessing videos, podcasts, and health information, alongside regular communications. Additional benefits include a healthcare cash plan, occupational health support, lunch and learn workshops, mental wellbeing e-learning, menopause training and resources, wellbeing challenges throughout the year, virtual mindfulness, yoga, and pilates sessions, financial wellbeing webinars and resources, and dedicated mental health training for line managers.



SOURCES

Enginuity. (n.d.). Employee wellbeing at Enginuity. <https://enginuity.org/news-events/employee-wellbeing-at-enginuity>

This Can Happen. (2023). Best Mental Wellbeing in the Workplace Strategy: SME. <https://www.thiscanhappenglobal.com/>

RADIAL

provides 'hands on' finance support to Private Equity investors and SMEs. The company implements a hybrid workplace policy that fosters inspiration, motivation, and a shared set of values. Employees are encouraged to reach their full potential, benefiting both themselves and clients. Moreover, the organization ensures complete transparency regarding salaries, new projects and its financial outlook.



GERMANY



1-10 EMPLOYEES



CONSULTANCY
(FINANCE)



HIGHLIGHT:

REMARKABLY HOLISTIC

WORKPLACE WELLBEING BEST PRACTICES

At Radial, employees have access to various initiatives designed to enhance their physical and mental wellbeing. Recognizing the demanding nature of consultancy roles, Co-Founder Dr. Sascha Haggenmüller, CPA and also a certified business coach, provides on-demand business coaching to the team to support his employees in navigating their careers effectively. Moreover, employees at Radial enjoy full flexibility in choosing their work environment, whether it is a modern office equipped with ergonomic furniture, home office, or mobile work options. The organization also offers a comprehensive benefits program, including gym memberships, transportation subsidies, internal training courses, and an annual budget of 1000 EUR per employee for further education.



SOURCES

Radial. (2024, February). Radi(c)al(Ly) different. <https://radial.consulting/>
S. Haggenmüller, Interview on workplace wellbeing at Radial by G. Parola, February 10, 2024.

4. Main takeaways

It is clear that the reporting of data alone cannot convey its significance, as it requires interpretation. Initial insights from this section of the report have been shared and enriched through discussions with experts in the field during our recent **webinar**.

In terms of information outlets, our data reveals that almost one-third of the managers interviewed already rely on training and coaching as sources of information on workplace wellbeing. This finding holds particular significance, especially considering that the STAY OK project anticipates a pilot training. It will be vital to differentiate it from the current available offerings. One notable point raised by some of our informants was the perceived lack of practicality in existing training programs.

Within the challenges identified, a surprising discovery is that not all micro-enterprises operate under resource-poor conditions, as only a quite small amount of the managers interviewed cited economic constraints. This finding may help explain why the great majority of organizations at the centre of this study have well-being policies and processes in place, despite all being micro-enterprises. Alternatively, this could be linked to various factors such as national demands regarding workplace regulations, fierce competition for talent within the professional service sector, or even a self-selection bias among managers participating in the study.

Always in the challenges category, psychological barriers stand out but only **6% of managers mention tools** specifically focused on mental health. This observation raises questions about whether the implementation of trendy or fashionable well-being measures and events takes precedence over addressing deeper underlying issues.

Turning to the practices implemented, it is clear that well-being holds significant importance even in micro-enterprises. The fact that **20% of managers employ preemptive strategies** and **17% engage in active monitoring and control** is an encouraging sign.

However, flexibility, the cornerstone policy, poses a double-edged sword. On one hand, it accommodates organizational demands by offering remote work or flexible hours, yet it also complicates efforts to establish a clearly defined organizational identity and maintain structure within the firm. Additionally, employee strain and shortcomings, such as loneliness resulting from remote work, warrant attention and consideration.

During the discussions surrounding our preliminary findings, the expert panellists emphasized several key suggestions aimed at enhancing the **STAY OK curriculum** to address the complexities of workplace wellbeing better. Among these recommendations was the inclusion of a clear overview of existing legislative tools and international standards pertaining to workplace wellbeing. Panelists stressed the importance of providing comprehensive guidance in navigating these frameworks to ensure that organizations can effectively implement strategies that align with global best practices.

Moreover, the panelists emphasized the significance of equipping managers with the skills necessary to navigate contradictory organizational demands. Specifically, they highlighted the need for managers to adeptly balance wellbeing considerations with operational requirements. This entails not only recognizing the importance of employee wellbeing but also understanding how to integrate these priorities into day-to-day decision-making processes within the organization.

Additionally, highlighted the importance of **managers' relationships with investors** and underscored the need for investors to prioritize companies that put employee wellbeing center stage. The panelists argued that human capital is the primary asset of MSMEs and that neglecting employee wellbeing can significantly undermine organizational success. They emphasized that investing in wellbeing initiatives is essential for the long-term sustainability of small companies.

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Appendix

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to our Workplace Wellbeing Interview!

This interview is divided into four sections and aims to inform the development of a targeted training program on workplace wellbeing for business leaders like you.

In this interview, think of workplace wellbeing as „physical health and comfort, mental health, a preponderance of positive over negative affect, and positive attitudes towards work.“ (Cooper & Leiter, 2017, p.1)

Please be assured that your answers are strictly confidential. Once the data is analyzed for the final report, individual responses will not be identifiable. Your participation is invaluable, and we appreciate your time and input in fostering a healthier and more supportive work environment.

Thank you for your commitment to enhancing workplace wellbeing.

SECTION I: ORGANIZATION'S AND LEADER'S DETAILS

Section I seeks to collect information pertaining to the organization, as well as demographic details and background information about the leader.

1. What is the size of your business in terms of the number of employees?
2. Is your business in the private for-profit sector, an NGO, or another sector?
3. In which industry does your business operate, such as marketing services, software services, financial services, consultancy, etc.?
4. What are your gender and age?
5. Can you provide details about your professional background, including your experience and expertise within the organization?
6. Can you provide details about your educational background, including degrees and any specialized training or certifications?

SECTION II: LEADER'S EXPERIENCE WITH WORKPLACE WELLBEING

Section II aims to compile insights into the leader's experience with workplace well-being and the challenges encountered.

1. What is the extent of your experience in supporting your employees with workplace wellbeing?
2. What types of challenges have you encountered when managing workplace wellbeing in your organization?
3. How confident were you in addressing these challenges on a scale from 1 (not confident) to 5 (very confident)?
4. Regarding these challenges, what were their effects on:
 - Employee performance?
 - Business operations and growth?
 - Yourself?

SECTION III: LEADER'S SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE ON WORKPLACE WELLBEING

Section III explores the leader's avenues for obtaining information and guidance on workplace wellbeing.

1. What sources do you rely on to acquire information and guidance regarding workplace wellbeing:
 - Training/coaching?
 - External HR consultants?
 - Other sources of information and guidance?

SECTION IV: LEADER'S CURRENT APPROACHES TO SUPPORTING WELLBEING IN THE WORKPLACE

Section IV aims to gather information on approaches implemented within the leader's organization to support wellbeing in the workplace.

1. What approaches do you use to implement workplace wellbeing in your organization:
 - Accreditation schemes (e.g., ENSHPO)?
 - Organizational workplace wellbeing policies?
 - In-house counseling/therapy offered to employees?
 - Workplace wellbeing awareness training offered to employees?
 - Organizational workplace wellbeing information available for employees?
 - Promotion of an environment conducive to new forms of work (incl. flexible working hours, remote work, home-office)?
 - In-place mechanisms for monitoring, vigilance and proactive support of workplace wellbeing?
 - Cultures of openness around wellbeing (including mental health) in the workplace?
 - Types of adjustment and support offered (e.g., time off, flexible working hours)?



STAY OK

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