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SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE: THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

People are increasingly turning to technology to help them maintain a healthy mind—and for advice about, and even treatment for, mental health challenges.

New Accenture research shows how companies can tap the power of technology as part of a holistic approach to improving employee health and wellbeing.
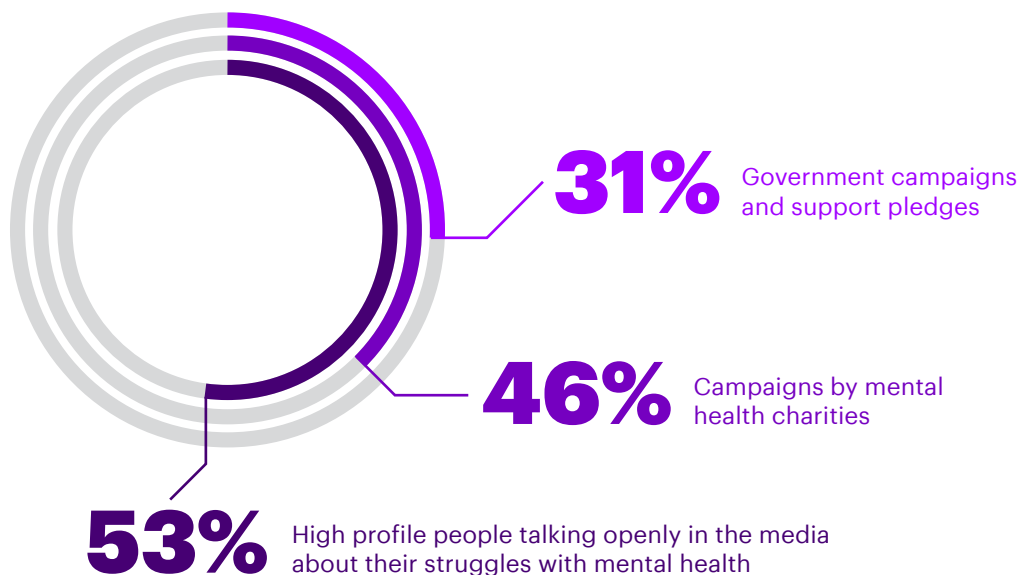
INTRODUCTION

Business leaders are increasingly aware of the need to support their employees' mental wellbeing. In part, this reflects an increase in open debate on the subject. Between 2013 and 2017 for example, we have seen a seven-fold increase in the number of articles in UK media[i] on mental health. The long-held stigma associated with mental health issues is finally beginning to fade.
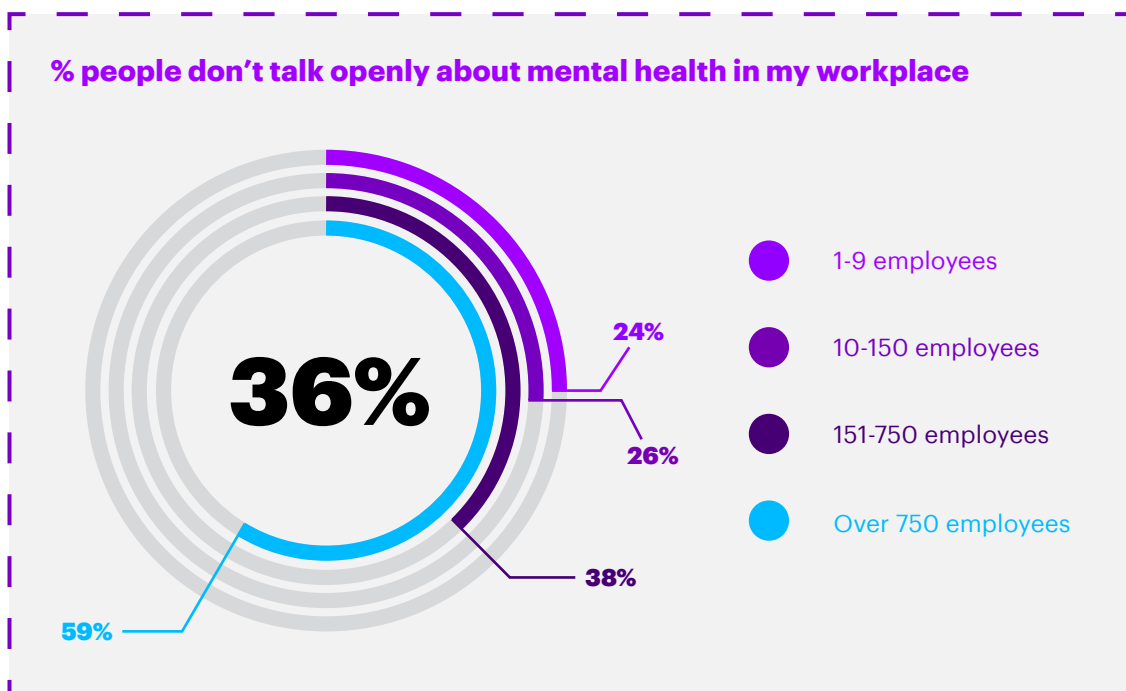
Findings from Accenture's June 2018 survey of 2000 workers in the UK attest to this trend. Eighty-two percent of respondents said they are more willing to speak openly about mental health issues now than they were just a few years ago and cite as drivers of change the willingness of high-profile individuals to talk about their personal struggles (53 percent) as well as the work of mental health charities (46 percent). Meanwhile, an increasing number of research-based campaigns have focused on the role of the workplace in employees' mental health.

31% Government campaigns and support pledges

46% Campaigns by mental health charities

53% High profile people talking openly in the media about their struggles with mental health

This is tremendously good news because there is a significant need for increased and improved mental health care. According to a recent study by Mind, 48 percent of employees in the UK have experienced a mental health problem while working for their current employer.[ii]

The challenge is that despite real progress in the understanding and acceptance of mental health issues overall, it's still a difficult topic to raise in the workplace. Thirty-six percent of the employees we surveyed said that people don't talk openly about mental health at work. Small and medium-sized companies (those with 1 – 9 and 10 – 150 employees) were the least open. At these organizations, 59 percent and 38 percent of respondents, respectively, reported that people don't talk about mental health at work.

Moreover, only 14 percent of our respondents said they had heard a senior leader talking about the importance of mental health. Just 1 in 10 had heard a senior leader talk about being personally affected. If the leadership of an organization is not actively engaged in the discussion around mental health it's hard to expect employees to open up. In our study only 25 percent had heard a colleague discussing mental health.

% people don't talk openly about mental health in my workplace

36%

24%
26%
38%
59%

● 1-9 employees
● 10-150 employees
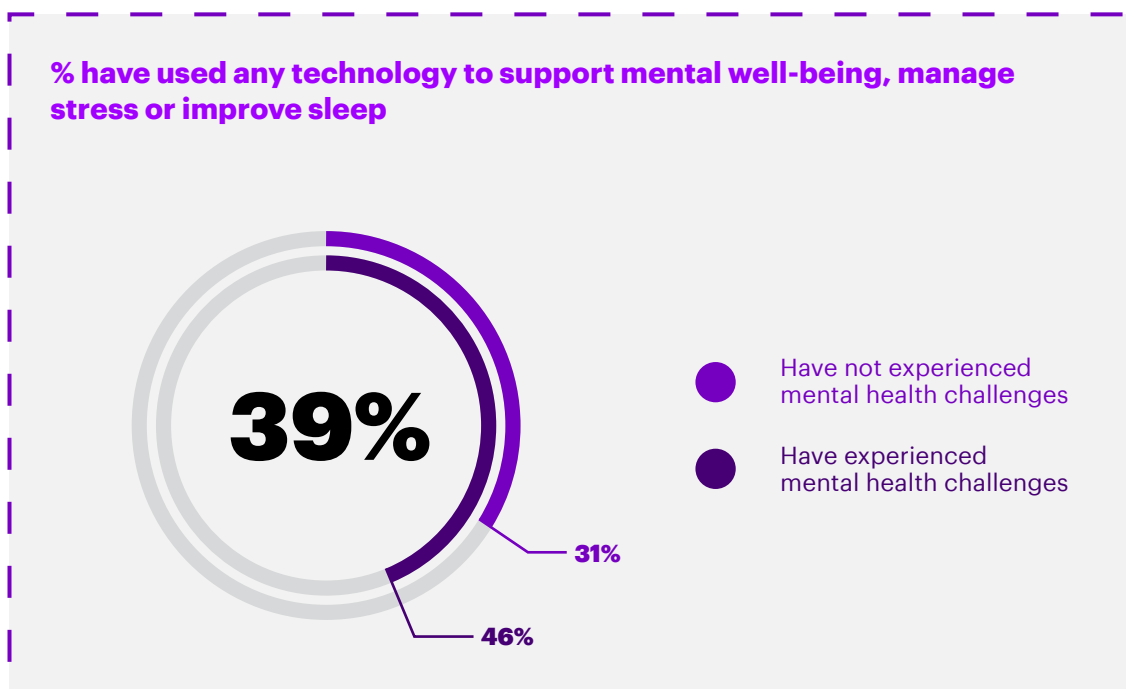● 151-750 employees
● Over 750 employees

Our research shows that 77 percent of workers agree that people should take proactive steps to manage their mental health. It also shows that technology can help normalize and advance mental health care at work. If companies can harness the opportunities offered by technology-based mental-health resources to support mental health – and mitigate the associated risks – the potential benefits are profound.

TAKE A CUE FROM THE GENERAL TREND: PEOPLE ARE INCREASINGLY TURNING TO TECHNOLOGY TO HELP THEM MANAGE THEIR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

The cues for how companies can apply technology to help employees manage and improve their mental well-being are apparent in current consumer trends. Consumer health technology in general is a rapidly growing market. Across England, people increased their use of mobile technology to manage physical and mental health by 30 percent from 2016 to 2018.[iii] Since 2015 the number of health apps has doubled with over 320,000 apps available to download from leading app stores.[iv]

Two thirds of the employees in our study (65 percent) reported that they're positive about the role of technology in helping people manage their mental and physical health. And 39 percent have already used technology to help improve or manage their mental wellbeing. This figure rose to 46 percent among those who said they have experienced mental health challenges.

% have used any technology to support mental well-being, manage stress or improve sleep

39%

31%

46%

● Have not experienced mental health challenges

● Have experienced mental health challenges

Our respondents were open to using technology to support all aspects of their mental wellbeing, with the most frequent use being to search for information and advice (82 percent do this already or would consider it). Online helplines and counselling services were also popular (72 percent), as were chatrooms and peer groups (67 percent) and online consultations and GP services (65 percent). These data, in particular, suggest that people value the ability to access services and get advice and support in the "anytime, anywhere" way afforded by digital technologies.

And which of these have you used – or would consider using – to support your mental wellbeing?

Used + Consider Using

82%	**72%**	**67%**	**66%**	**65%**
Websites where you can search for advice and information e.g. NHS Choices, Mind	Online counselling services or helplines where you can access help from professional counsellors/ advisors	Online communities, chatrooms & support groups for sharing stories and seeking guidance anonymously	Apps or interactive tests online which help diagnose mental health	Online interactive consultation/ GP services like Baby

Respondents were also using (or open to using) technology to manage mental health challenges. Technology-based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) tools were popular among our survey respondents, as were apps that promote healthy sleep habits and teach or facilitate the practice of mindfulness or meditation. In addition, more than half of the employees surveyed (52 percent) would use chatbots that rely on artificial intelligence to help them manage a health condition.
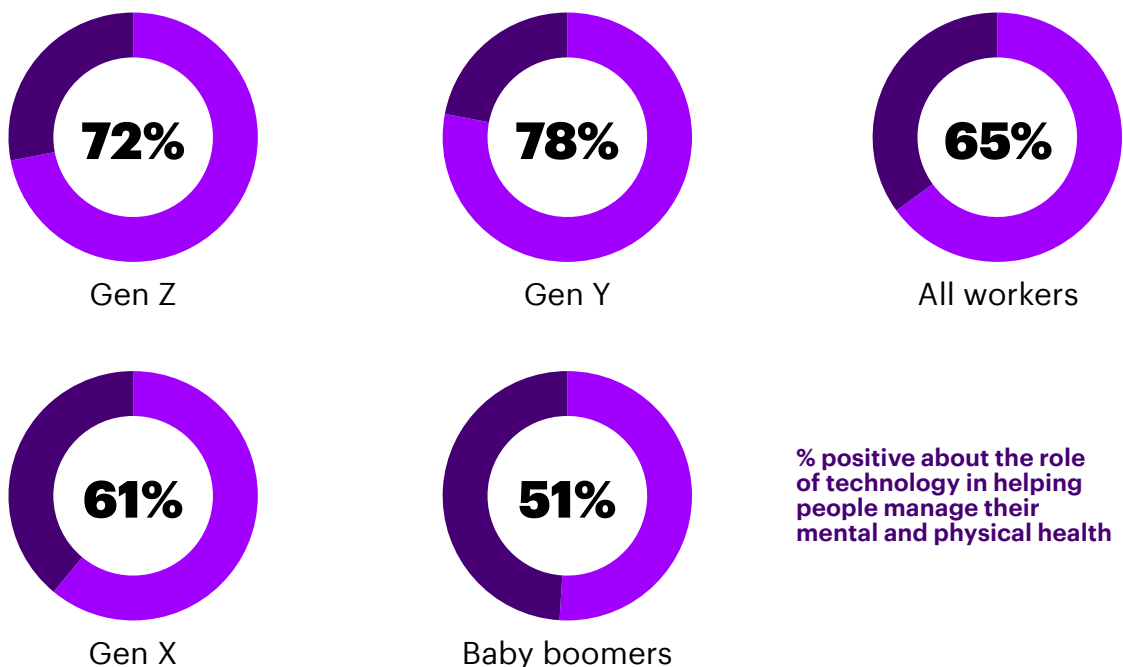
In the workplace, these sorts of resources can be offered to great effect. Consider: The most common reason for not opening up about mental health at work, according to a study by the Mental Health Foundation and Unum, is fear of being discriminated against or harassed by colleagues.[v] But online advice services, chat rooms and peer groups will typically allow individuals to remain anonymous, thus enabling someone who is afraid, or not ready to talk openly, to begin seeking help. So, giving employees access to a confidential online platform that offers an array of mental health management tools and services, is one way to overcome that barrier while an organization simultaneously works to create a culture that takes away the fear of opening up. These tools can be offered at scale at affordable costs; smaller organizations can direct employees to well-vetted, trustworthy publicly available forums.

GET READY FOR THE RISING GENERATION OF EMPLOYEE

Technology-based mental health resources are designed for all ages; however, in the work environment, our findings suggest that younger workers are likely to take advantage of them more than others.

Younger workers, for example, were the most positive about the role of technology in helping people manage their health: 78 percent of Gen Y versus 51 percent of Baby Boomers.

How important do you believe the role of technology is in helping people manage their mental and physical health?

72%
Gen Z

78%
Gen Y

65%
All workers

61%
Gen X

51%
Baby boomers

% positive about the role of technology in helping people manage their mental and physical health

Younger workers were also significantly more likely to use technology to support their mental health. For example, 80 percent of Gen Z respondents already use (or would use) online communities, chatrooms, or support groups, vs. 47 percent of Baby Boomers. Every employer knows that the new generation of workers bring different skills, expectations and needs to the workplace (see also box on 'Tomorrow's Workers); helping them manage their mental wellbeing should be part of that discussion.

TOMORROW'S WORKERS AND ONLINE MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

As part of our overall research, Accenture surveyed 400 university students. Like the workers who participated in our study, most students (82 percent) said they are more willing to speak openly about mental health issues now than they were several years ago. And 43 percent cited the growth of online sources such as websites, chatrooms and forums as an important driver of change.

45 percent have already used technology to manage stress, improve sleep or for their mental wellbeing, and 81 percent said they have used or would consider using technology to search for information and advice. Many used apps for guided meditation or relaxation (75 percent) and for better sleep (74 percent).

One of the reasons students reported that they turn to technology for help or advice with mental health is that it is available at night, when other sources of help are harder to access or not available (23 percent said this was the case). And interestingly, students were more cautious than workers about using technology when they didn't know how well it had been tested (34 percent of students versus 25 percent of workers).

SAFEGUARDS WILL BE NEEDED TO ENSURE THAT THE POTENTIAL IS REALIZED WITH MINIMAL RISK

One key responsibility for a company offering access to mental health services through technology will be vetting those services effectively. Another is to ensure that tech is not presented as the only resource, but as part of a holistic set of offerings.

Access – or signposting – to reliable, trustworthy services:

The sheer number of services available makes this a difficult task. Type "mental health advice UK' into a search engine and you'll get at least 120 million results. You'll see websites, apps, chatrooms, symptom-checkers, and more. The sheer volume of sites offering help is daunting. In response, most people look for assurance that the site,

or app, or service that they are considering is trustworthy. In fact, 67 percent of the employees we surveyed looked for an endorsement from a professional organization before choosing where to get support. The NHS (33 percent), GPs (25 percent), and mental health charities (21 percent) were cited most often as preferred references.

A third of workers surveyed were willing to use technology as an alternative to traditional therapies for mental health without any professional guidance. But when we looked at Gen Y and Z workers alone, that figure rose to almost half.

32%
I'd be willing to try some of these approaches without referring to medical professionals, based on my own research and assessment.
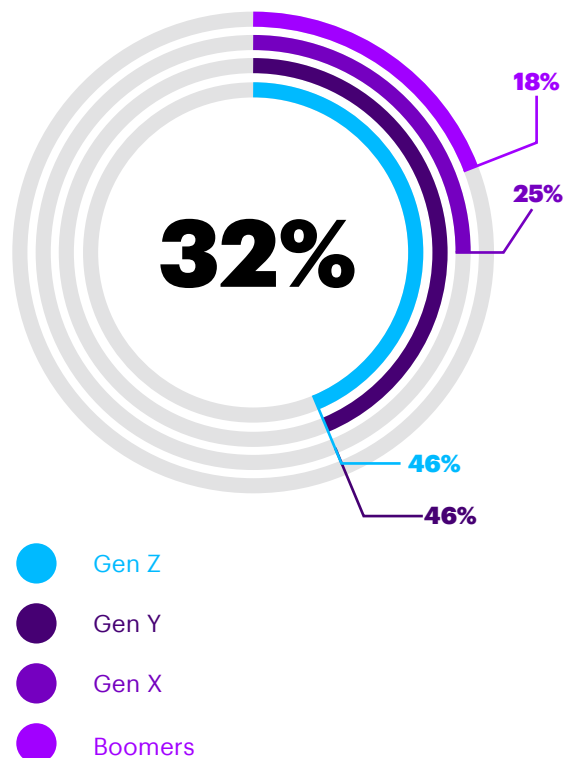
24%
I'd only try it in combination with traditional therapies e.g. doctors appointments, face-to-face counselling.

31%
I'd be willing to use these as my main form of support, but only if recommended by a professional who knew me.
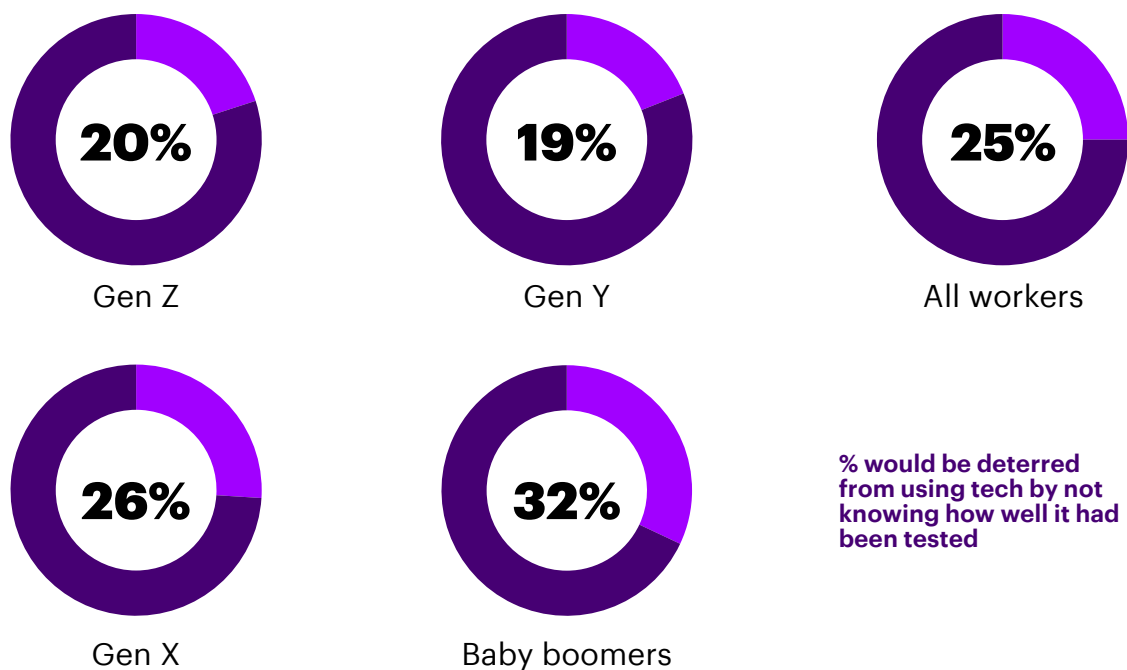
13%
I wouldn't use these approaches.

18%
25%
32%
46%
46%

- Gen Z
- Gen Y
- Gen X
- Boomers

Although many employees (also 67 percent) worry about the lack of testing they do not seem to be looking for evidence that a technology had been tested before using it; only 25 percent would be deterred from using it by not knowing how well it had been tested and younger people are the least concerned of all (20 percent of Gen Z versus 32 percent of Baby Boomers). A third (rising to 46 percent among Gen Z and Gen Y) say they would be willing to try technology-based approaches without reference to medical professionals and 66 percent said they have or would use technology to diagnose their own condition.

What, if anything would put you off turning to technology?

20%	**19%**	**25%**
Gen Z	Gen Y	All workers

26%	**32%**	**% would be deterred from using tech by not knowing how well it had been tested**
Gen X	Baby boomers	

Employers could act as curators of technology for mental health, providing access to trusted tools where possible. Or, as noted earlier regarding smaller organizations' capacity for offering tools and services, companies can offer employees a screened list of the best publicly available resources.

Offering tech-based support/ services as an integral part of a holistic set of offerings

Although largely very positive about the use of technology in mental health, one concern expressed by a majority of respondents (58 percent) was that tech support for mental health could delay someone from seeking the professional help they might need.

This finding highlights the fact that employers should not rely on technology alone in their efforts to support employee mental health. Line managers should be trained to recognise the signs of stress and mental ill health; they should be vigilant in their efforts to support employees. Similarly, the company should ensure that Human Resources professionals are trained, and attuned, to the mental health needs of employees. And all employees, at all levels, should have clear protocols (process and systems) around what action steps to take when they need help for themselves or a colleague so that no employee 'falls through the net.' Employers need to create a holistic network of support and services; they cannot merely offer one type of solution, or one channel of access to mental health support.

SUPPORT FOR EVIDENCE-BASED INTERVENTIONS

The proliferation of online tools and digital technologies alongside consumers' willingness to use them without medical advice or evidence of their effectiveness does raise some concerns.

More rigorous independent testing of the technologies being offered would allow companies and individuals to select those that are most effective, or best suited to their needs. Such testing should focus on securing evidence that the interventions are helping to improve outcomes.

A working group led by NHS England and including MedCity, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), Public Health England, and DigitalHealth.London, is developing guidance and standards to address this issue. Such guidance will be an important tool for employers seeking to offer technology-based resources and to ensure that innovation leads to better outcomes for peoples' mental health.

"

"MQ welcomes this important report and recommendations, which add a fresh perspective to the important discussions around improving mental health at work. Over recent years, thanks to the hard work of businesses, campaigners and policy-makers, awareness of the issue has been transformed, stigma is being tackled, and information is more readily available than ever before.

However, we know that a major treatment gap still exists – with too many people going without the right support. The challenge this report sets is how we can build on increased conversations and develop effective ways of treating and preventing mental health conditions at work. The workplace provides an excellent opportunity to intervene and provide long-term solutions. But as highlighted by Accenture, there is a significant and urgent need for evidence-based mental health interventions in the workplace. Through research we can change this and at MQ we're working with businesses to make this a priority."

Sophie Dix, Director of Research at mental health charity MQ

CONCLUSION: THE INCLUSIVE, HEALTHY WORKPLACE

Technology has an exciting and critical role to play in companies' support of their employees' mental health. Used well, it can be:

Empowering: helping employees take responsibility for their own mental health

Anonymous: offering a safe, confidential environment for those not ready to talk openly

Accessible: available wherever and whenever it's needed

Digital-friendly: relevant for the next generation of employees who have grown up with digital technologies

Affordable: relatively low cost for employers and employees

Scalable: effective for all sizes of business, organizations and communities

But there is much to be done. The independent review of mental health and employers led by Lord Denis Stevenson and Paul Farmer in 2016[vi] reported that only four in 10 organisations currently have policies or systems in place to support employees with common mental health problems. And in our study, those at the C-suite level were far more optimistic about how much support their organization provided than those further down in rank. Most (88 percent) C-level executives were aware of initiatives around mental health within their organization but that number dropped to 50 percent for workers below the manager level. This gap is evidence that more proactive communication, training and support from employers is needed.

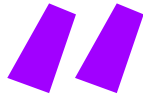Where can companies start? With a three-fold approach, by:

Developing a culture where people can thrive and be themselves. The starting point for managing mental wellbeing at work is the workplace culture. Accenture research[vii] published earlier this year revealed that both men and women thrive in more inclusive cultures—those characterised by bold leadership and fair policies, and where employees feel empowered, trusted and can "be themselves." In such environments, employees are more likely to love their job, be happy with their progress, and advance to more senior levels. Leaders who are visibly committed to culture change and who talk openly about the importance of mental well being are key to a successful programme.

Adopting the mental health core standards. The Stevenson-Farmer Review sets out six standards for employers and offers guidance on how this might be done. The recently launched Mental Health at Work[viii] site, **https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/** is an exciting new resource. It can serve as a forum on which to share the most effective tools for employers, which in turn can direct their employees to trustworthy solutions.

Embracing technology as part of a holistic programme.
Technology has the power to help employers support their employees as part of a comprehensive wellbeing programme. For employees, knowing who to talk to or where to go for the most effective help can be confusing and many technology interventions on the market stand alone, addressing a single need (sleep, stress, anxiety) rather than the whole person. Employers can help employees to understand what needs can be met online and when it's important to seek advice and help from a medical professional.
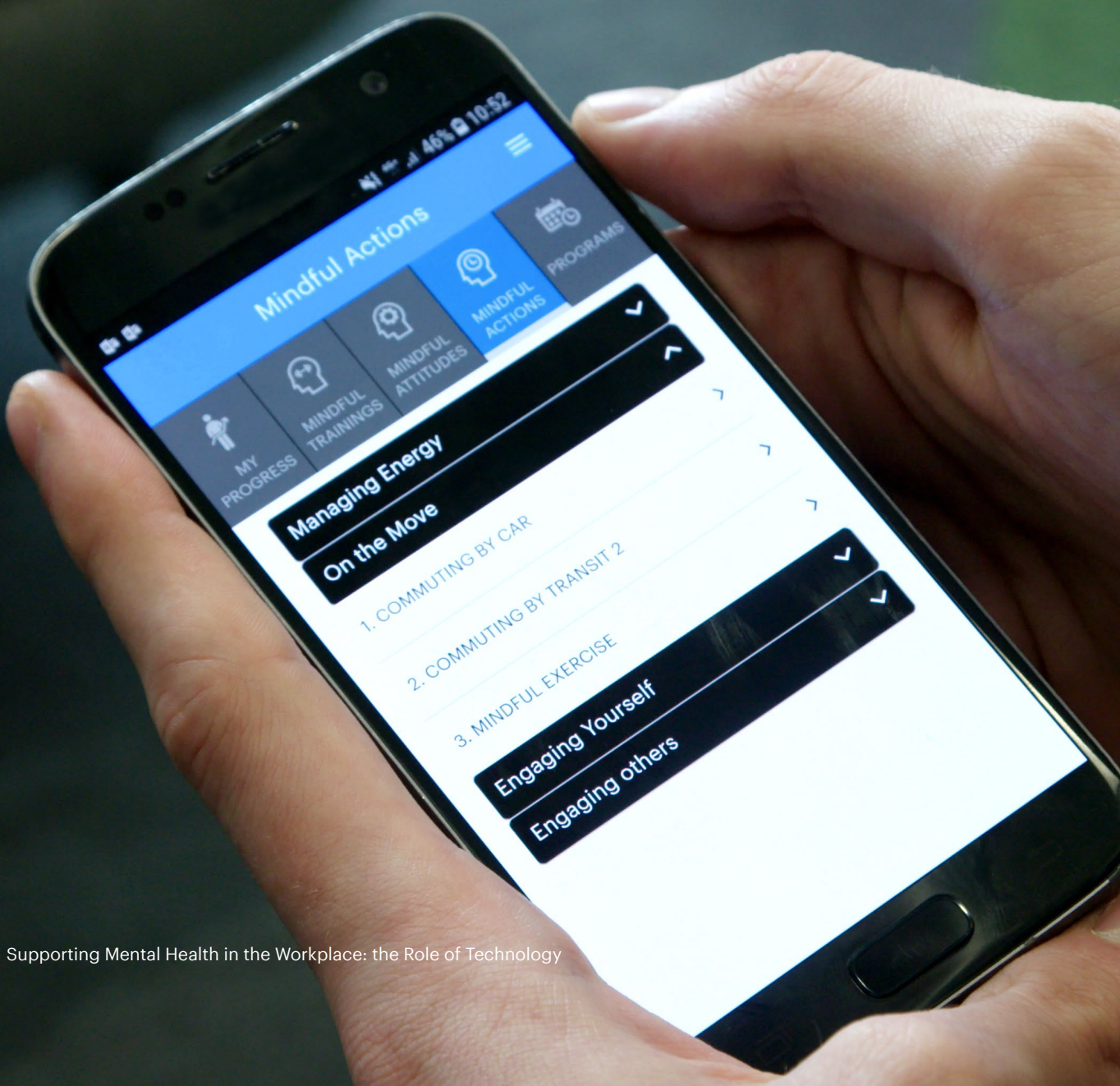
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"At Accenture we're working to create a culture where everyone is able to talk about their mental health and knows how to help a colleague who may be struggling. And we want to empower people to do what's right for them when it comes to mental wellbeing. It's still hard to open up at work, and technology offers a vital channel for those who are not ready to talk, as well as for those who are working away from home. The more we talk, build awareness, and create channels for people to seek help, the fewer people will struggle alone. Doesn't everyone want a happy, healthy workforce?"

Barbara Harvey, Managing Director and Lead for Mental Health, Accenture UK

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

Accenture conducted an online survey of 2000 UK workers (full time, self-employed and those working more than 15 hours part-time) and 400 undergraduates in June 2018.

Accenture Research shapes trends and creates data-driven insights about the most pressing issues global organizations face. Combining the power of innovative research techniques with a deep understanding of our clients' industries, our team of 250 researchers and analysts spans 23 countries and publishes hundreds of reports, articles and points of view every year. Our thought-provoking research - supported by proprietary data and partnerships with leading organizations, such as MIT and Singularity - guides our innovations and allows us to transform theories and fresh ideas into real-world solutions for our clients. For more information, visit www.accenture.com/research.

APPENDIX: MENTAL HEALTH AT ACCENTURE

1 Accenture has a holistic health and wellbeing programme that incorporates physical and mental health and focuses on awareness and prevention. It is part of a broader programme that is designed to create a culture where employees can bring their whole self to work.

2 We recognise that there is still a stigma within workplaces and society in general when it comes to talking about mental health and seeking help.

3 We introduced a Mental Health Allies programme to get the message across that it's okay to talk about mental health, and also to equip people with the right skills to enable them to support colleagues in need. We already have more than 1,500 trained Mental Health Allies throughout our UK business. They have each gone through a three-hour classroom-based training session to increase their understanding whilst building confidence and skills in addressing common mental health challenges through roleplaying and scenario training. This training also explores the boundaries between the responsibilities of a line manager and the role of mental health allies.

4 Accenture offers a free confidential counselling service available through Bupa, open to all Accenture employees 24/7. The Employee Assistance Program (EAP), can also help employees with a variety of issues such as managing stress in the home or workplace, legal and financial issues and relationship problems.

5 Technology plays an important role in our programme: online awareness training is available to all; employees have access to a confidential, professionally managed chat environment where they can remain anonymous and that can be accessed at all times wherever our employees are, we have developed a mindfulness app and offer access to other apps to support sleep and general wellbeing. And we're using our technical expertise to design new tools, working alongside mental health and medical professionals.

REFERENCES

[i]   Accenture Research based on analysis of UK articles from 2013-2016

[ii]   Mind press release 11 September 2018

[iii]   Accenture (2018) Patients+Doctors+Machines: Consumer survey on digital health

[iv]   Digital Therapeutics in the NHS, April 2018

[v]   "Added Value – Mental Health as a Workplace Asset", Unum and Mental Health Foundation, 2017

[vi]   "Thriving at Work – The Stevenson-Farmer Review of Mental Health and Employees"

[vii]   "When She Rises, We All Rise" Accenture, 2018

[viii] Mental Health at Work was launched on 11 September by the Duke of Cambridge. The 11 partners behind it are Heads Together, CIPD, the Federation of Small Businesses, the City Mental Health Alliance, Mental Health First Aid, the Work and Health Unit, Public Health England, NCVO, The Work Foundation, Time to Change and the Institute of Directors.

ABOUT ACCENTURE

Accenture is a leading global professional services company, providing a broad range of services and solutions in strategy, consulting, digital, technology and operations. Combining unmatched experience and specialized skills across more than 40 industries and all business functions – underpinned by the world's largest delivery network – Accenture works at the intersection of business and technology to help clients improve their performance and create sustainable value for their stakeholders. With approximately 459,000 people serving clients in more than 120 countries, Accenture drives innovation to improve the way the world works and lives.

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