Employee experience trends for 2021

Produced by **People Insight**

Peopleinsight

Looking back, stepping forward

Levels of growing unrest and uncertainty as we progressed through 2020 forced organisations to think and do things differently, especially when it came to their people.

Leaders and HR adapted quickly to reprioritise activities in the wake of Covid, the Black Lives Matter movement, and socio-economic political unrest. Many businesses entered survival mode, with tough decisions made about furlough and layoffs as well as wholesale reviews of future strategy.

This reactive state meant planned people strategies took a back seat. As we enter 2021 with a growing list of priorities and a tighter squeeze on budgets, our 2021 Employee Experience predictions will help you focus on what matters most.
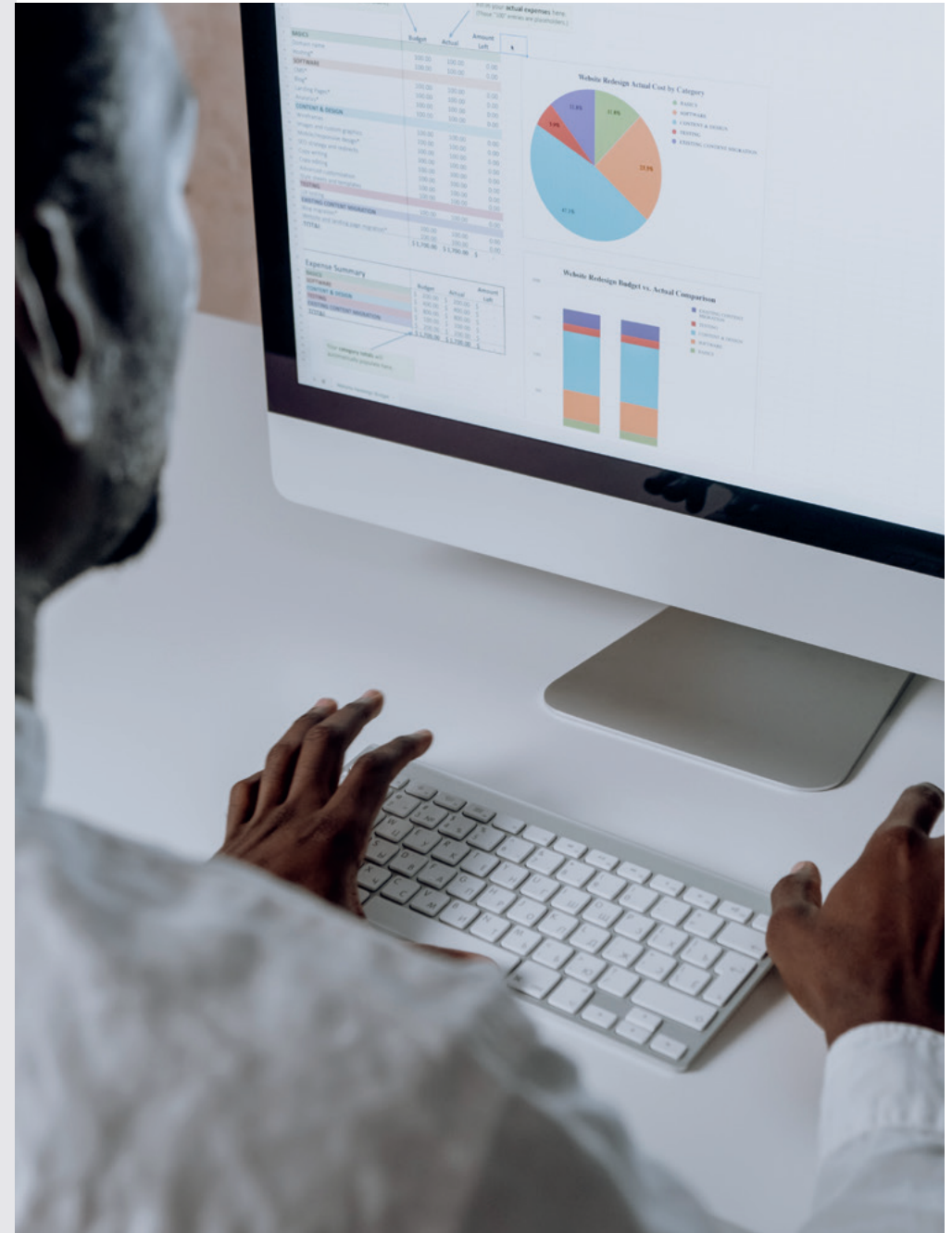
At the heart of our 2021 predictions are 3 underlying trends:

▶ **Authentic and agile leadership is here to stay.** The constant state of flux in 2020 forced leaders to make rapid and often reactive decisions. People will be looking to their employers for support and transparency as the uncertainty continues; the spotlight will be firmly fixed upon leaders.

▶ **Rebuilding a more human workplace.** When no longer an emergency fix, large-scale remote working brought about operational and cultural challenges. New technology and a rethinking of office space can transform how we work together, but its success relies on autonomy and trust. Cementing values, behaviours and culture will be more important for organisations than ever.

▶ **Caring for employee health and happiness.** The exhaustive list of psychological and physical stressors faced by employees is now, in part, the responsibility of employers. Organisations must step up in these areas, or risk losing talent. Employers must do more to support employee health and happiness, including making major progress with their diversity and inclusion (D&I) commitments.

People Insight's 2021 employee experience trends

1. **Frequent listening, a new standard**

2. **The connected leader**

3. **The workplace isn't dead, just different**

4. **D&I progress must measure up**

5. **Taking care of mind and body**

1. Frequent listening, a new standard

2020 changed how we think about ad-hoc/pulse surveys. During the pandemic, many organisations recognised the value of checking in with employees on a regular basis to inform decision making. For example, employers like London South Bank University used a series of pulse surveys to gather preferences on home and office working arrangements and inform their transition back to campus.

The potential of this rapid feedback means employee pulse surveys are now an essential part of a leader's toolkit.

Pulse survey mythbusting!

Pulse surveys can seem like a big step on from traditional listening programmes. We answer your most common concerns about frequent listening:

1. **'Can I schedule a Pulse?'** We like to plan our listening activities for the year, but pulse surveys are designed to be on-demand. They're perfect for digging into burning issues and should sit as a ready to deploy solution alongside your listening schedule. Look for a trusted partner who can deploy your pulse at the speed you need.

2. **'They take too long.'** If you feel like pulse surveys are too burdensome to implement, bring in an expert survey partner who will do the heavy lifting for you. Keep things simple, it's unlikely that you need a full organisation hierarchy, and keep the focus on the things you do need, like speedy access to dashboard results.

3. **'It's just another job for HR.'** You are the internal listening experts and govern the survey process, but overall accountability has to be shared with your leaders and managers. Choose survey tech with features to empower local ownership and action.

4. **'You have to start from scratch.'** Experts have already done the thinking for you, so dip into the wealth of question banks available that can also be externally benchmarked. Check out our returning to work and Diversity and Inclusion pulse survey question sets.

5. **'More feedback = more to do.'** There's no hiding from this one. If you ask for feedback, you must follow up with meaningful change. Our advice to keep things under control is identify your realistic pace of change, and only survey as often as you can act.

In the year ahead, leaders will use frequent listening to:

1. Inform new working arrangements. Surveys will support the design of new working arrangement policies and practices by understanding employee preferences e.g. number of office days, work schedules, and caring commitments.

2. Improve health and happiness. An employer's wellbeing strategy is going to be crucial for ensuring a mentally and physically fit workforce. Surveys will reveal current states, enabling the design of targeted wellbeing strategies.

3. Navigate through change. With more change on the horizon as organisations rebound after Covid, pulse surveys that can measure employee sentiment will ensure that changes are successful, and employees buy in to the process.

4. Invest in equality, diversity and inclusion. When investing in D&I programmes which people have a strong personal response to, it is vital to understand how employees are experiencing them and measure their impact. Targeted surveys will gather valuable insights to inform long-term D&I strategies.

PI's top tips for success with frequent listening:

▸ **Make the tech work for you.** Look for interactive results reporting, with all the functionality you need to take action after your survey.

▸ **Define a purpose and stick to it.** Don't try and make a pulse survey do everything, and only ask what you need to know.

▸ **Ask for comments.** Include a couple of open-text questions that invite employees to share ideas. Your people can provide you with innovative solutions, from the ground.

▸ **Be open to honesty.** Employees can be reluctant to share their real, ugly feedback in a survey. Explain to employees and managers the purpose of your survey, how the feedback will be used and that no-one will get in trouble.

▸ **Show what's changed.** Use clever comms to show what has changed since your last survey, and what has happened as a result of employee feedback.

For more tips, read our Complete guide to running a pulse survey

Instant access to pulse survey insights

People Insight's reporting dashboard makes it easy to surface insight.

▸ Personalised dashboards for everyone from leaders to line managers

▸ Built-in key driver analysis helps you focus on your priority action areas

▸ Instantly add your actions to an interactive action plan

▸ Compare everything: internally, externally, choose the benchmarks that suit you

▸ Managers can share results rapidly with their teams using iDeck

▸ Action plan with confidence using Inspirations suggested against each survey question

Book your demo today

2. The connected leader

2020 was a pivotal year for communication. Responding to the pandemic forced leaders to become more transparent, open and human when connecting with their employees. There's no turning back from this now.

At a time of low national mood, leaders can keep spirits and engagement high by leveraging this newfound relationship with employees. These authentic connections will also help get people onboard with reshaped plans and embrace the change to come.

2021 will shine a spotlight firmly on leaders, giving them the perfect opportunity to showcase their corporate values and behaviours. Leaders will be expected to walk the talk, with employees no longer standing for anything less.

As summarised by David D'Souza, Director of Membership, CIPD *"Remote working and social distancing need not mean distant leadership. In fact, it requires a depth of contact and connection that has always marked out the best leaders."*[i]

Your comms briefing for 2021:

▸ **People don't want polished.** Turn up as you are, speak sincerely and follow through on what you promise. These are the leadership lessons from the pandemic that we mustn't let go of.

▸ **Tell a story with data.** Employees understand charts and graphs more than we might have realised, helped by a national crash course during the UK Government's Covid briefings. Share important data with them but pull out the insights from it to create a compelling story.

▸ **Don't wait for the 'right time' to listen.** It's never going to be a perfect time. However employees will always have things to say that you need to hear and act on.

▸ **Embrace the good, the bad and the ugly.** Honest feedback from employees can be frightening, but it's always better to know than not. Transparency builds trust, keeps us connected, and reduces uncertainty.

How to get started:

▸ **Run an internal comms audit.** If your messaging isn't cutting through in the right way, it's important to understand why. Ask employees what they are hearing and believing, from whom, and what their comms preferences are. This insight will help develop a long-term comms strategy that hits the mark every time.

▸ **Understand how well managers are connecting.** 360 feedback gives a rounded picture of a manager's performance. Customise the questionnaire to assess how effectively managers are connecting with people and creating trust and belief.

▸ **Show empathy.** Use emotional intelligence as part of your leadership toolkit and welcome honesty across your organisation. Harness technology to understand how employees are feeling, monitor sentiment and invite their feedback on change.

"Recognizing signs your employees display when things may not be going well is important. When our teams believe we are seeking to understand their personal and professional hardships, we're able to foster a new level of mutual trust and respect, which can ultimately yield more committed, focused and happy team members." Forbes

3. The workplace isn't dead, just different

Despite tech giants such as Twitter and Fujitsu now offering permanent remote working[ii], most businesses expect employees will want to return to the office[iii] at least some of the time once an effective vaccine is in place.

Employee sentiment backs this up. According to Gartner 48% of employees hope to work remotely at least some of the time post-pandemic[iv], and People Insight's [survey data](#) suggests that 50% of respondents would prefer to work from the office 3-4 days each week.

However our offices won't look the same. In fact McKinsey recommend we completely rethink what we know about the office and redesign it for a new purpose[v]. Your 2021 workplace is set to become a social hub, a collaborative space and a haven for those without an effective home office.

A place of productivity

Consider your different groups, and the environment they need to do their best work. Millennial workers were hit hardest by remote working, with 62% citing poor home working conditions[vi]. Here's why many will still need a physical office in 2021:

▸ Access to technology, systems and ergonomic workspaces **ensures employees can do their job comfortably and effectively**

▸ A shared workplace offers interaction and social support. **Remote working can be lonely**, especially for those living on their own.

▸ When we're together, **we can read the room and use visual cues to sense how people are responding** and spark off one another's ideas. These interactions are crucial to greater understanding during 1:1s or focus groups.

▸ Many people struggle to switch off[vii] when working from home. **A separate workspace creates a healthy boundary between work and home life.**

A new lease of life: Your 2021 office

Centralised City headquarters will be replaced with smaller, regional hubs,

to reduce the amount of travel required of employees[viii].

Flexible managed workspaces like Work.Life

(home to People Insight!) will be on the rise, since only a fraction of the workforce will be in at a time, also saving costs at a time when businesses are looking to operate lean.
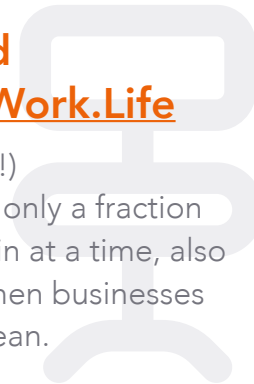
Hybrid open-plan spaces

will accommodate networking, innovation and team-working. Semi-private spaces will facilitate coaching and 1:1 conversations, which our research shows can't be done as effectively over Zoom. Phone booths and quiet areas will appeal to introverted personalities, ensuring everyone feels at home in the office[ix].
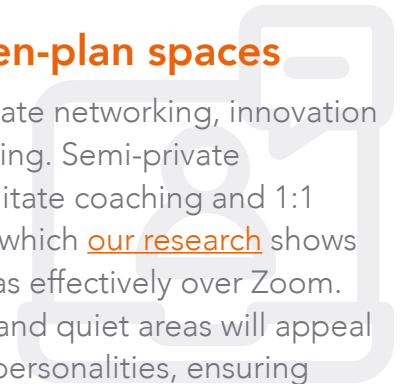
Technology will play a central role

with autonomous cleaning solutions, people-counting sensors, collaboration tools and touchless entry ensuring people's safety and peace of mind[x].
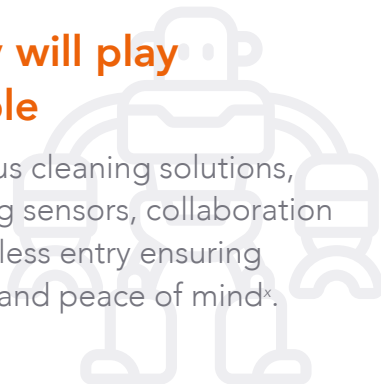
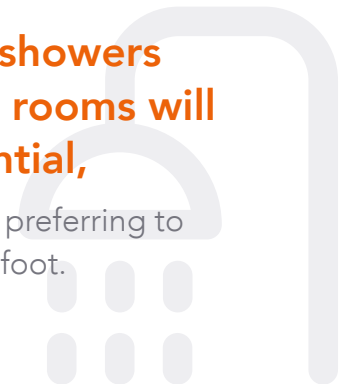With focused work being done mostly at home,

desk spots will be cut right down

to take up only 20% or so of the office space[xi].

Facilities like showers and changing rooms will become essential,

to cater for people preferring to travel in by bike or foot.

4. D&I progress must measure up

Sparked by social movements including BLM, #metoo and, in the UK, gender pay gap reporting, 2020 often felt like a bitter pill to swallow as we realised that we are not where we should be when it comes to D&I.

Last year saw some progress made, for example UPS revised longstanding uniform guidelines around natural hairstyles and gender-specific rules[xii] and Salesforce launched an accessibility support team to build more inclusivity into their customer platform[xiii]. However 2021 will demand organisations do much more to challenge discrimination and be actively anti-racist.

To make an impact this year, organisations must create D&I strategies which explore all areas of diversity, including race, gender, socioeconomic status and neurodiversity, and are embedded into all aspects of an organisation from recruitment through to values and behaviours. 'Tick in the box' policies are not enough. For many organisations this means bringing in an D&I specialist (take a look at current LinkedIn vacancies for an idea of the number).

Organisations will also be expected to measure and report on their D&I progress, with investors, employees and potential talent holding leaders to account. Our clients like Brewin Dolphin, Vinci Construction and several Universities and Emergency Services already use employee surveys to gather and report on D&I data.
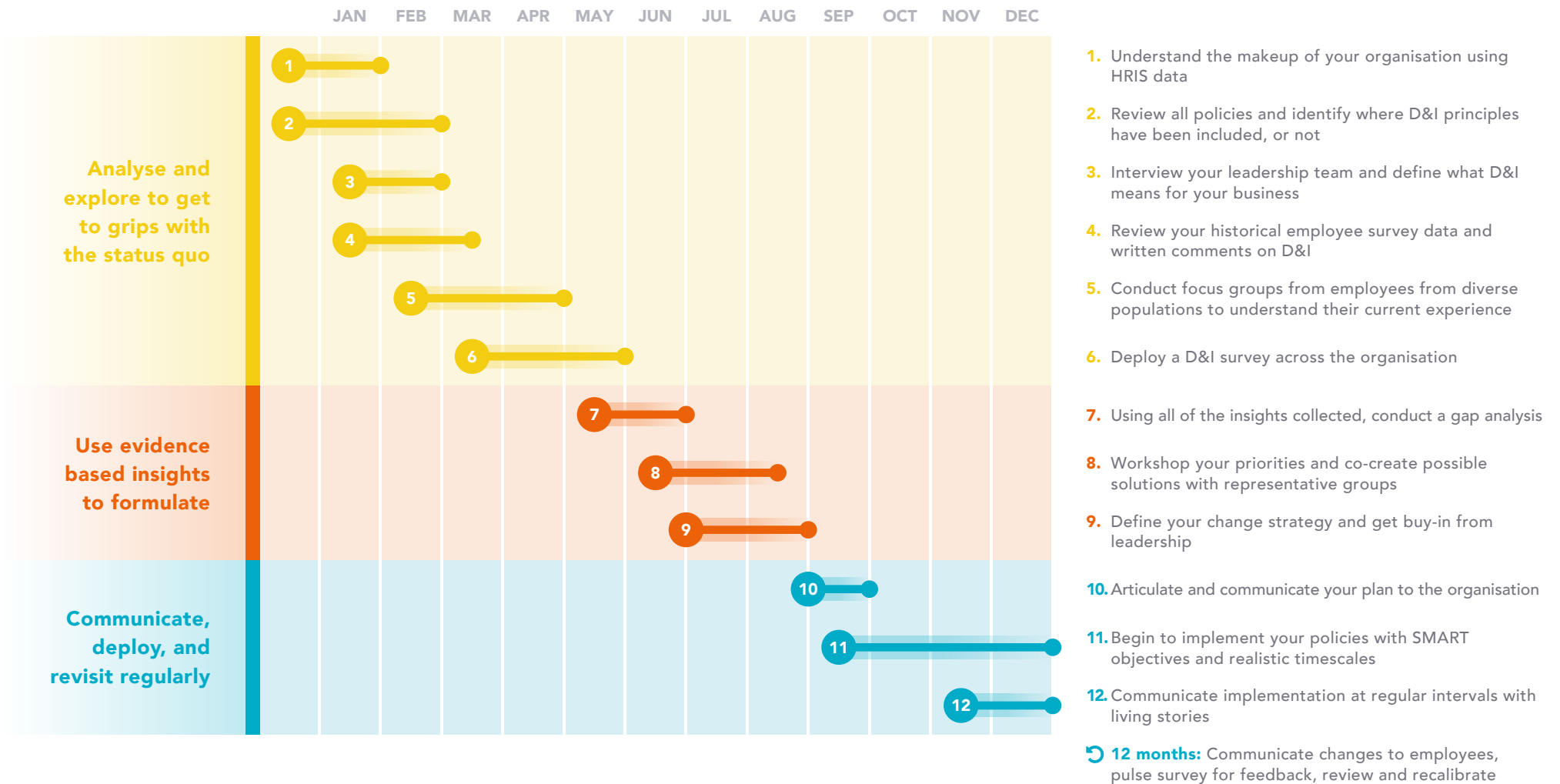
On top of increased pressure from internal stakeholders, Fortune also announced recently that their 2021 Fortune 500 List will include D&I rankings for companies[xiv]. The heat is on.

The business challenges D&I specialists are likely to face

- Organisation and leadership fear of the unknown with the possibility of uncovering systemic issues

- Not recognising the issue in the first place

- Unconscious bias influencing decisions

- Assumptions that a policy is the solution and that one size fits all

- Missing the differences between equality, diversity and inclusion

Tackling D&I is a big ask, turn the page for your 12-month action plan.

Analyse and explore to get to grips with the status quo

Use evidence based insights to formulate

Communicate, deploy, and revisit regularly

1. Understand the makeup of your organisation using HRIS data

2. Review all policies and identify where D&I principles have been included, or not

3. Interview your leadership team and define what D&I means for your business

4. Review your historical employee survey data and written comments on D&I

5. Conduct focus groups from employees from diverse populations to understand their current experience

6. Deploy a D&I survey across the organisation

7. Using all of the insights collected, conduct a gap analysis

8. Workshop your priorities and co-create possible solutions with representative groups

9. Define your change strategy and get buy-in from leadership

10. Articulate and communicate your plan to the organisation

11. Begin to implement your policies with SMART objectives and realistic timescales

12. Communicate implementation at regular intervals with living stories

↺ **12 months:** Communicate changes to employees, pulse survey for feedback, review and recalibrate

We're here to help: Download our FREE D&I question-set sample

Speak to us about designing bespoke D&I focus groups, workshops and questionnaires.

5. Taking care of mind and body

Employees are less psychologically and physically well now, when compared to before the pandemic[xv].

On top of their legal requirement for health & safety[xvi], organisations have in recent years taken on more responsibility for the holistic wellbeing of employees. To build success as part of the post-pandemic rebound, organisations will need to take this further in order to rebuild a healthy and happy workforce and support their employees' quality of life.

Supporting psychological fitness:

According to PHE[xvii] 14.3 million working days are lost to stress, anxiety and depression each year. This is likely to be heightened further by the stresses, anxieties and isolation experienced during the pandemic. Like D&I, this year will see employers step away from policy and paid-for solutions such as Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP), and instead help their people overcome this challenge through behavioural change.

Behavioural support employers can deliver:

▸ **Create an engaging place to work** that gives employees a sense of purpose, direction and orientates them towards personal and shared goals

▸ **Encourage empathy and compassion** from leaders, managers, and peers

▸ **Continue to accommodate personal circumstances,** particularly in working arrangements

▸ **Show sensitivity to those impacted by the pandemic** in the language used

▸ **Raise awareness of mental wellbeing** so employees can recognise and acknowledge when they are experiencing stress

▸ **Provide employees with help** to manage their state and response by building resilience

▸ **Make frontline response available** such as by training mental health first aiders

Supporting physical fitness:

Gyms closing during lockdown, the loss of a commute and limited access to outdoor activities resulted in a switch for many employees to more sedentary lifestyles. According to Ofcom, adults were spending 45 hours per week in front of a screen[xviii] and diets also became less healthy[xix].

With clear evidence linking physical health to performance[xx], employers will need to take on some of the responsibility for the fitness of their workforce.

Ways to support employee health:

▸ **Gamification of health activities,** such as team step challenges

▸ **Office based learning** on diet and exercise

▸ **Promotion of wellbeing support,** such as subsidised gym memberships

▸ **Discounts and vouchers for healthy eating solutions** such as noom or hellofresh

▸ **Encourage walking meetings**

▸ **Provide health plans/insurance rewards** linked to activity

▸ **Activity monitoring using trackers** e.g. Virgin Pulse

▸ **Social activities,** such as laughter yoga and recreational sports teams

▸ **Home workplace self-assessment,** encouraging employees to check their set-up

Solve your employee engagement challenges

At People Insight, we are more than a survey platform.

We design and deliver highly successful survey programmes throughout the employee lifecycle. But delivering insights is just the start; our focus is on helping you generate action and create behavioural change.

We use the latest technology to gather data and surface insights. Then our experts ensure you are ready and equipped to use those insights to drive change that will impact your Business and People priorities.

Our programmes improve the experience, retention and performance of tens of thousands of employees like yours across the public, private and not for profit sectors.

We'd love to talk

To find out how People Insight can help you evaluate and improve your employee experience and culture in 2021, contact us at:

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