Workload Pressures

are a key driver of workplace wellbeing

Workload pressures refer to the impact that job demands, task intensity, and time constraints have on employees' wellbeing.

A manageable workload with clear expectations can enhance engagement and motivation, while excessive pressure, unrealistic deadlines and role overload can lead to stress, burnout, and reduced wellbeing. Striking the right balance in workload distribution is crucial for sustaining employee wellbeing while maintaining productivity.

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Workload Pressures
Interventions

Prioritise burnout prevention as a core wellbeing strategy

Burnout poses a serious threat to both employee wellbeing and organisational performance, making proactive, targeted strategies essential. Evidence indicates that interventions focused specifically on burnout are often more readily accepted in the workplace than those addressing broader mental health concerns. As a result, they may be more effective in fostering meaningful engagement and delivering tangible results.[1]

Effective Burnout Prevention Strategies:

o **Integrate approaches** by combining individual-level support (e.g., training, coaching) with organisational changes (e.g., job redesign, workload management).[2]

o **Include self-care planning** in stress management education; personalised plans reduce emotional exhaustion among nurses.[3,4]

o **Sustain impact** through refresher sessions, which can extend benefits for up to two years.[5]

o **Foster organisational responsibility**, as shown in a U.S. fire department program combining CBT, leadership development, and peer support.[6]

o **Embed prevention in organisational culture** with strong leadership support and ongoing reinforcement.

Burnout

The World Health Organisation defines burnout as an "occupational phenomenon" caused by chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.[7] It is characterised by:

- Exhaustion
- Work-related cynicism
- Reduced professional efficacy

Burnout is the result of excessive job demands without adequate resources that can harm both physical and mental health. **41%** of employees worldwide experience work-related stress daily,[8] and mental-health-related absences cost UK employers **~£51 billion/year**.[9] Burnout also contributes to higher turnover, reduced engagement, lower customer satisfaction, and increased safety incidents.[10-12]

Evidence suggests that organisational-level interventions that effectively mitigate workload demands, enhance autonomy, and foster supportive leadership produce **larger and more sustained reductions** in burnout compared to individual-level approaches (e.g., resilience training, mindfulness).[13,14]

Burnout prevention is a system-level challenge. Address the working conditions that cause burnout—rather than just treating its symptoms—by monitoring employee stress, spotting early warning signs (e.g., declining work quality, withdrawal, increased sick leave), and acting early. Prevention should be embedded into organisational culture, with workload management prioritised and employee wellbeing established as a core KPI.

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Reduce total working hours

Reducing total working hours, whether through a compressed schedule, flexible arrangements, or a four-day workweek without loss of pay, is emerging as a powerful structural intervention to alleviate chronic workload pressure, burnout, and work–life conflict. Whilst the four-day week has captured public attention, well-designed schedules with reduced and flexible hours can deliver similar benefits. A growing body of academic research shows that shorter workweeks can improve employee wellbeing and, in many cases, sustain or even boost productivity.

o A 2024 systematic review of 31 peer-reviewed studies spanning five decades (1970s–2020s) found that shorter workweeks were generally associated with **improved morale, job satisfaction and health lifestyles, along with lower absenteeism and turnover**.[15] Benefits were most evident in administrative and knowledge-based roles.

o Evidence from trials of the four-day week across 153 companies and nearly 3,181 workers showed considerable improvements for wellbeing. **The study reported substantial reductions in burnout (39%) and fatigue (71%)**, alongside improvements in mental health, sleep, and life satisfaction. Most firms maintained or increased productivity, and the majority continued the schedule after the trial.[16]

o Avoid increasing monitoring and performance pressures.[17]
o Provide ongoing organisational support to protect wellbeing long-term, including for people managers.[18]
o Other flexible work arrangements can accentuate more traditional gender roles and childcare responsibilities.[19]

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## Evidence from large-scale 4-day work week trials

A major cross-national study of 4-day workweek interventions shows that reducing working hours with no loss of pay produces significant, measurable improvements in employee wellbeing.[16]

Across 153 organisations and 3,181 employees, reductions in working time were linked to lower burnout, higher job satisfaction, and better mental and physical health—patterns not observed in control companies. These benefits are mediated by better sleep and fatigue, as well as improved sense of ability.

Additional organisational case studies also demonstrate an ability to improve or maintain key performance indicators, and increased appeal in recruitment.[20]

- o **Average weekly hours decreased by 5 hours**.
- o **Wellbeing improved across multiple measures**, including burnout, fatigue, job satisfaction, and mental and physical health.
- o **Larger individual reductions produced greater gains**, demonstrating a clear dose–response.
- o **Work reorganisation was crucial**, with companies removing low-value work, reducing unnecessary meetings, streamlining processes, introducing new technology, and improving collaboration to enable reduced hours.[21]
- o **Teams benefit most when they review and streamline their workflows**.[22]

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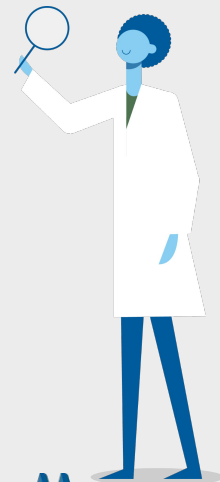
Improve meeting design to protect focus and wellbeing

Poorly structured and frequent meetings heighten workload pressure by interrupting concentration and reducing opportunities for deep, focused work.[23] Evidence shows that shorter, more purposeful meetings can reduce cognitive load, preserve focus time, and improve workflow predictability.[24]

Top three evidence-informed meeting practices:

1. **Adopt shorter default meeting lengths:** Use 25-minute meetings instead of one-hour blocks to counter time inflation, sharpen discussion, and reduce meeting fatigue.[25] The logic aligns with Parkinson's Law, which shows that work expands to fill the time available for its completion.[26]
2. **Plan meetings with clear purpose and structure:** Provide agendas in advance and summarise decisions and action points at the end. Structured meeting leadership improves clarity, alignment, and follow-through, while reducing frustration.[27, 28]
3. **Strengthen virtual meeting design:** Qualitative and experimental studies highlight that intentional structure, shared norms, and active facilitation reduce virtual fatigue and maintain engagement.[24,29]

Findings from the UK Four-Day Week Pilot show that small, cumulative efficiencies such as shorter meetings, clearer workflows, and reduced digital friction, played a key role in enabling organisations to maintain performance while reducing working hours.[16]

Implement company-wide digital disconnection policies

In today's always-on digital work environment, the Right to Disconnect (R2D) has emerged as a viable policy response to growing concerns around digital overconnectivity and work–life conflict. While R2D is formalised through legislation in many countries, organisations are also voluntarily adopting disconnection policies as part of broader efforts to promote sustainable, healthy work cultures.

R2D policies are most effective when they are supported by **clear expectations, leadership role-modelling**, and **employee input**. The following case studies illustrate how organisations across sectors are embedding R2D into their workplace practices:[30,31]

- **AXA (France)** implemented a group-wide disconnection charter, supported by mandatory manager training and an internal system that disables email alerts during evenings and weekends. Managers are held accountable for respecting these boundaries. Internal surveys report improved perceptions of work–life balance and greater support for psychological detachment.
- **Siemens (Germany)** adopted email-free evenings and weekends as a cultural norm without national legislation. Teams co-create digital charters that define expectations around availability and communication. Senior leaders explicitly role-model disconnection and employees have reported reductions in perceived pressure to stay online, especially among knowledge workers.

> Without realistic workloads and shifts in performance culture, R2D terms risk becoming symbolic or inconsistently applied, particularly in high-pressure or client-facing roles. Blanket rules can also have unintended effects and produce unequal outcomes.

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Promote healthy and productive email use

A 25-year systematic review identifies practical, high-impact email practices that reduce workload pressure, limit digital strain, and strengthen sustainable work practices.[32] Organisations can reinforce these behaviours by setting clear expectations for tone, format, CC use, response times, and appropriate communication channels, supported by evidence-based email training.
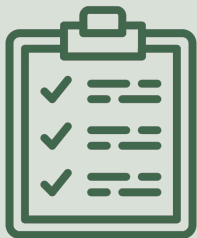
Evidence-based practices to reduce email-driven workload pressure

- o **Adopt structured email triaging system**
- o **Use scheduled sending to support healthy boundaries**
- o **Communicate working hours clearly** in email signatures and automatic replies
- o **Strengthen clarity through purposeful email construction** with effective subject lines
- o **Apply disciplined CC practices**
- o **Manage notifications intentionally**

By reducing mental load, protecting boundaries, and improving clarity, these practices collectively reduce digital overload, strengthen work–life boundaries, and foster a more respectful, predictable communication culture, all of which enhance employee wellbeing and improving task efficiency.

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Redesign work to boost organisational resilience

Redesigning work with wellbeing in mind does more than boost morale - it strengthens the overall functioning and resilience of an organisation. This intervention is particularly effective in high-stress environments, where rethinking how work is organised can significantly reduce stress, lower burnout, and enhance employee engagement, health, and performance.

Effective work redesign requires addressing core workflow inefficiencies such as offloading nonessential tasks, reducing time pressure, eliminating bottlenecks, and ensuring that job demands are aligned with available resources.[33]
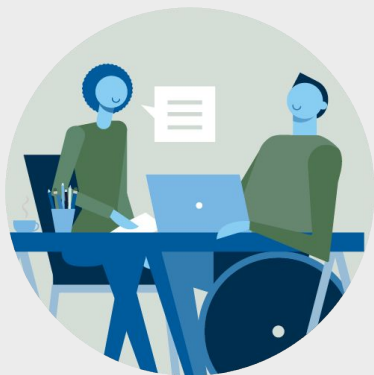
To be effective, these changes must be tailored to the specific demands of the industry and role. Evidence from the healthcare sector clearly illustrates the power of this approach, for example:

o In two Australian hospitals, an intervention that introduced a workload assessment tool, enhanced support and development access, and improved staffing practices, leading to significant **reductions in psychological distress and emotional exhaustion**, along with **increased job satisfaction and reduced turnover**.[34]

o A work redesign effort targeting medical specialists and nurses, and focused on reducing job demands, resulted in higher levels of work engagement and wellbeing, better health outcomes, and improved job performance.[35]

o In broader clinical settings, improving work conditions has been directly linked to **lower stress and burnout**.[36]
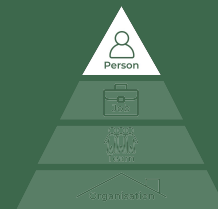
Refer also to other drivers:
o **Stress**
o **Operational Design**

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Use schedule control as a buffer against workload pressures

Providing employees with real autonomy over *when* and *how* they work is a powerful strategy for managing workload and protecting wellbeing. A growing number of intervention studies show that giving workers greater control over their schedules can reduce stress, mitigate burnout, and support performance.
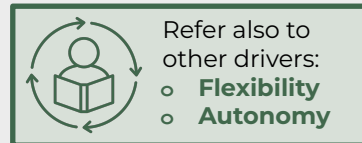
Refer also to other drivers:
- **Flexibility**
- **Autonomy**

The most effective implementations combine employee involvement, leadership commitment, and structured, team-based flexibility.

o   A Fortune 500 firm introduced a workplace flexibility initiative that allowed employees to adjust their schedules and work remotely based on their needs, and also provided manager training to support flexible arrangements. Employees reported **significantly lower stress** and reduced work–family conflict, with the strongest effects observed among parents and caregivers.[37]

o   A study in Finland showed that co-designed changes to increase job control, such as greater say over task planning and deadlines, led to significant reductions in exhaustion and cynicism, even without reducing workload.[38]

Employees can end up working longer and feeling more pressure to be constantly available, blurring the lines between work and personal life. Without intentional efforts to manage workload expectations and protect non-work time, schedule control risks shifting responsibility for work–life balance from the employer to the individual - exacerbating rather than relieving stress.[39]

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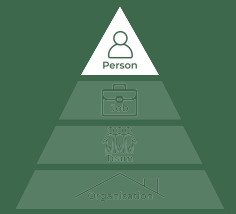
Use mindfulness training to buffer workload pressures and protect wellbeing

Research shows that **in the right conditions**, mindfulness training helps employees regulate stress, stay present, and respond more constructively to work-related challenges. Incorporating mindfulness into workplace wellbeing strategies can be a useful tool to help employees manage stress, improve focus, and protect mental health, particularly in high-demand roles where reducing workload is not always immediately feasible.

o A comprehensive review of mindfulness programs in the education sector found that the most effective interventions combined structured training, personal practice, and take-home assignments.[40] In contrast, self-guided digital programs delivered more limited benefits, while very lengthy interventions (exceeding 24 total hours) were linked to diminishing returns.

o **Such programs are particularly relevant for individuals in psychologically demanding roles**. For example, a six-session mindfulness-based program delivered to police officers in the Netherlands during a period of sustained workload pressure led to significant improvements in stress reduction, happiness, work ability, and overall emotional wellbeing.[41]

o Benefits may be overstated due to selection bias. Uptake and engagement are uneven, with those most in need often not participating; organisations should consider alternative ways to reach them.

o Well-designed training that enables employees to integrate new practices into daily work delivers the greatest long-term benefits, provided it is backed by ongoing organisational support.

o Lasting impact requires addressing workload demands through broader structural changes.

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Making the most of this resource

1 Measure

Conduct an employee survey to assess four core dimensions of employee wellbeing: **job satisfaction, happiness, stress, and sense of purpose.** Collectively, these provide a scientifically validated, multidimensional view of how employees experience work.

Equally important, organisations should measure **the drivers of workplace wellbeing** - the underlying working conditions, relationships, and organisational factors that shape those experiences.

2 Understand

Once you've got the data, the next step is to **identify which drivers most strongly predict wellbeing outcomes within your organisation.**

Workplace wellbeing is multidimensional, shaped by a range of drivers, but not all drivers exert equal influence in every context.

By applying **data analysis at scale**, organisations can uncover which factors most powerfully explain wellbeing within their organisation.

3 Act

Once you have identified your priority drivers, the next task is to **select and implement interventions** that address them effectively.

The Playbook provides a curated selection of **evidence-based interventions** to help you act with confidence to choose interventions that are both empirically grounded and contextually feasible.

Don't forget to build **evaluation** plans into your intervention design.

→ Read **our guidance** document before getting started, to ensure you get the most out of the resources.

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Sharing this resource

Cite this resource:

Regier, C., Cunningham, S., Fleming, W., Kirienko, A., Kaats, M., & De Neve, J. (2025). *Work Wellbeing Playbook: A Systematic Review of Evidence-Based Interventions to Improve Employee Wellbeing*. World Wellbeing Movement.

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Workload Pressures

is just one key driver of workplace wellbeing

These are just some of many evidence-based interventions recommended in the Work Wellbeing Playbook.

All recommendations and academic citations, organised by driver, are available for free on our website:

www.worldwellbeingmovement.org/playbook