



Managers feel the pinch

Emotional wellbeing in the workplace



1. Introduction

At the beginning of 2021, we released our first research report titled: *'This is how I am feeling: Emotional wellbeing in the workplace.'* This was the first of three research reports produced from our findings; documenting the broader data from the research and providing insight into the role of emotional wellbeing in the workplace and the extent to which different variables can impact how individuals experience wellbeing.

The following study is the second of the three research papers, with this report addressing the relationship between an individual's level of role and their emotional wellbeing through three categories: manager, director and colleague.

1.1 Methodology

This study was conducted using a qualitative research approach, with the research instrument being an online survey created through Google Forms. The questions were structured in the form of multiple choice, open ended and scaling questions.

The survey was open from 26 July 2021 to 3 August 2021. It was mainly communicated and shared on the social media platforms Twitter and LinkedIn.

There was a total of 327 responses.



2. Managers feel the pinch

Emotional wellbeing in the workplace

This will be the second of three research reports – focused on the interplay of the level of role and emotional wellbeing

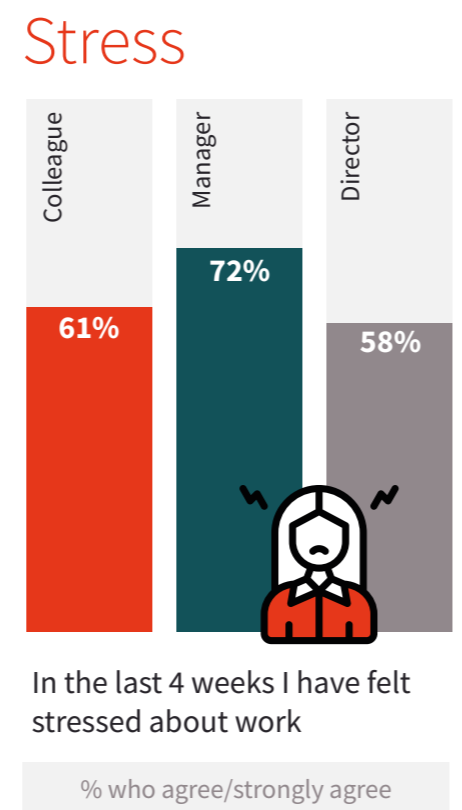
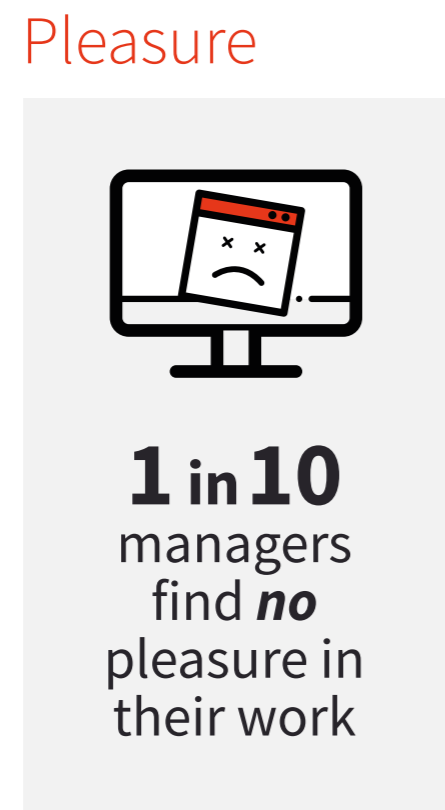
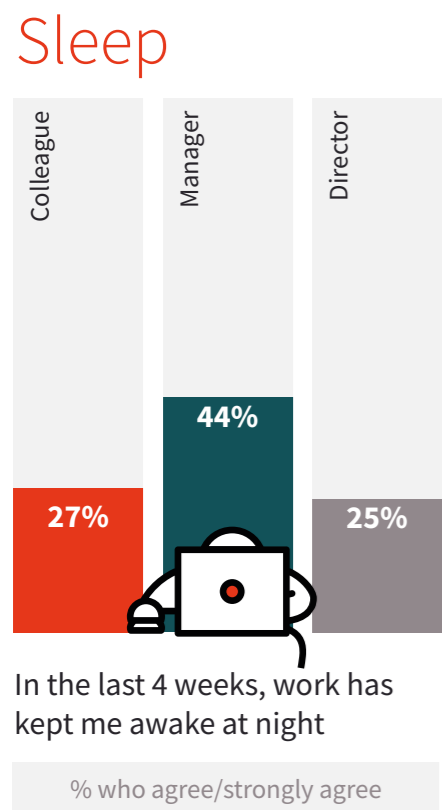
Info Sample size
327 responses

267 female
55 male
3 non-binary
2 prefer not to say
82% of respondents were female.

At what level do you work?

Colleague	105 (32.1%)
Manager	154 (47.1%)
Director	68 (20.8%)

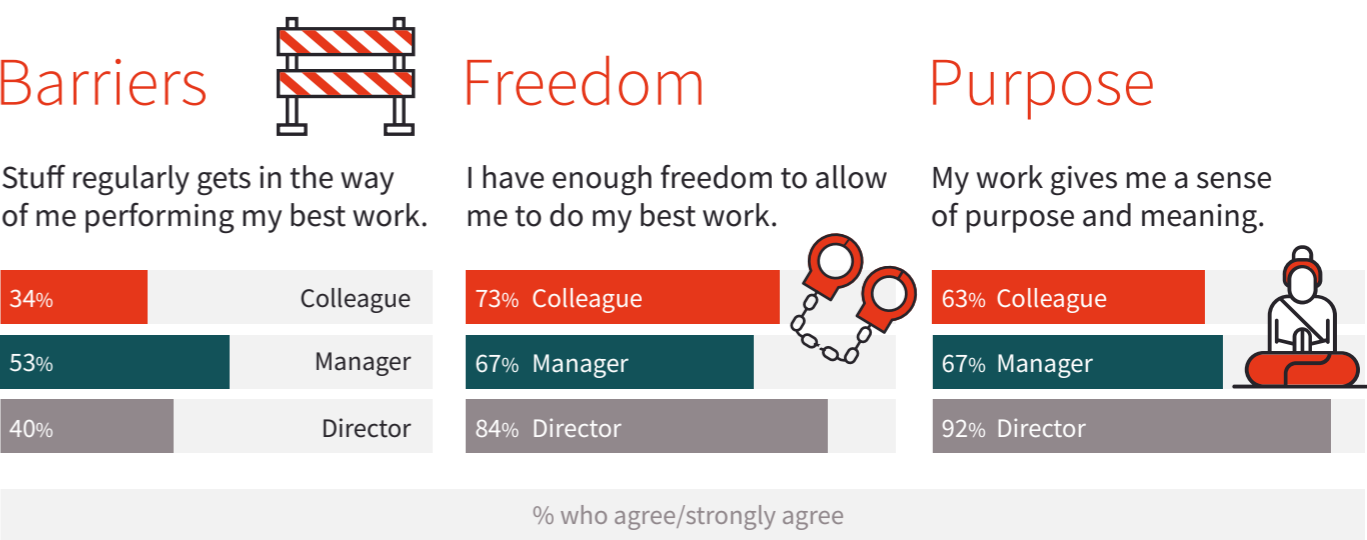
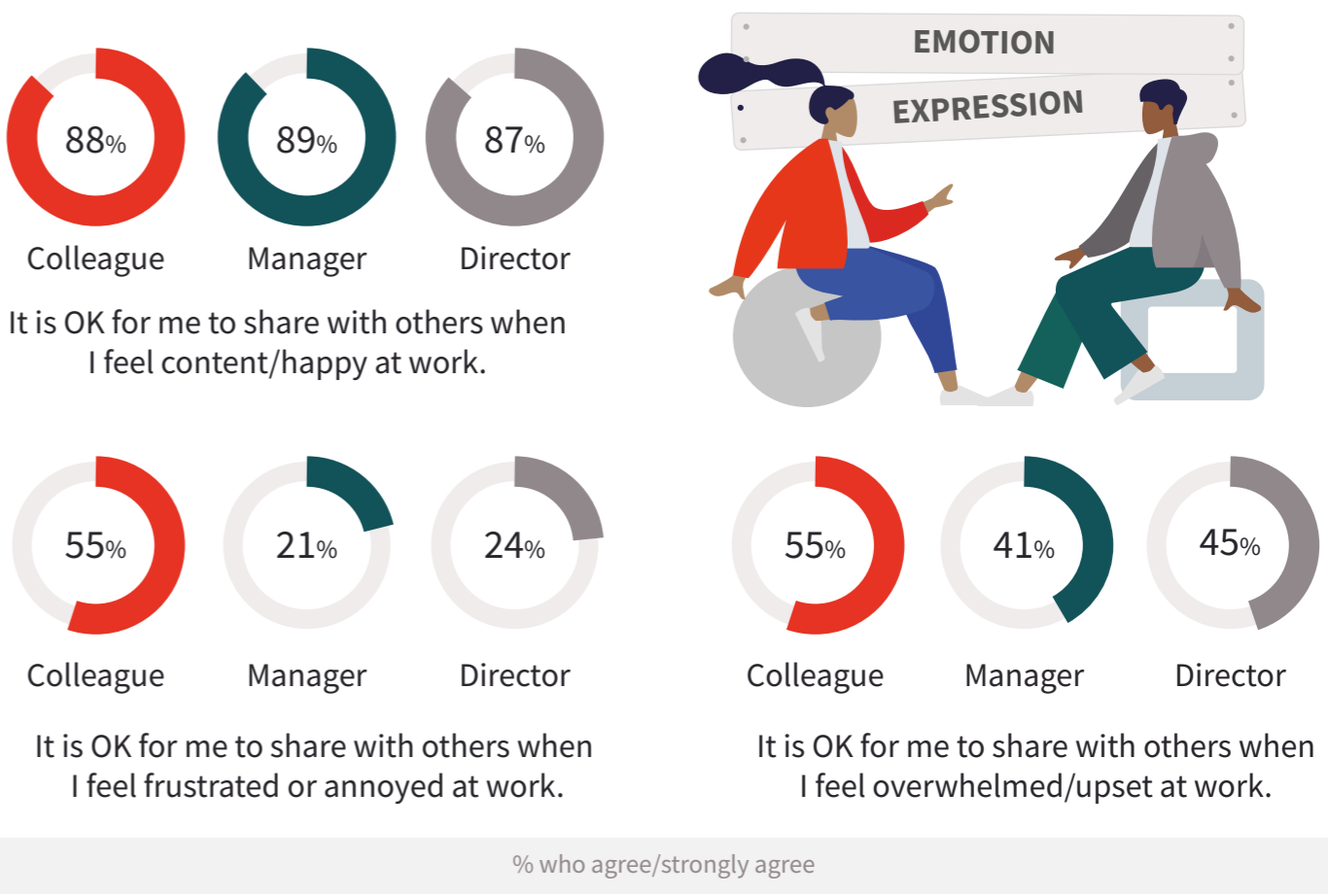
Findings on wellbeing outcomes



Summary of wellbeing outcomes

This research suggests that managers experience the least pleasure in their work. The data also demonstrates that, in the last 4 weeks, managers have been kept awake by work the most and have experienced more stress when compared to directors and employees.

Areas organisations can focus on to improve wellbeing



Summary of areas organisations can focus on

The above data suggests that managers feel the least able to share when they are feeling overwhelmed or frustrated at work. Managers also report experiencing the least freedom at work and the research suggests that stuff gets in the way of managers performing their best work more than directors or employees.

3. Backstory and context



3.1 Why we asked about level

One question we incorporated within our survey was ‘*At what level do you work?*’. We had some preconceived hypotheses that we wished to test by conducting a cross-analysis between the level of role and the wellbeing outcomes (as well as the variables that impact these outcomes).

We hypothesised that directors would report higher scores against the emotional wellbeing outcomes out of the three levels assessed because at senior level, conditions and nature of the role are more likely to support positive emotional wellbeing. The conditions and nature we hypothesized include (and are not limited to); higher pay and greater autonomy, more flexibility and less need to ‘manage impressions’ as they are in a senior role. Whilst it must be noted that each individual experience is subjective – and these outcomes can be impacted by factors such as the organisation worked for or the sector worked in – the level of seniority when working at this position in the workplace hierarchy was assumed to outweigh the negative effects on wellbeing outcomes.

For managers, we hypothesised that they would report experiencing the worst overall wellbeing; therefore, expecting colleagues to report their wellbeing as falling somewhere in between these two groups. As managers are perceived from different perspectives, this can bring with it a multitude of challenges – from negotiating and renegotiating their identity, to being presented with higher workloads and increased expectations.

3.2 How we can monitor wellbeing

Wellbeing in the workplace is a complicated and multifaceted subject whereby many elements can fall within its definition. Some elements of workplace wellbeing can include (but are not exclusive to): health, good work, personal growth, values/principles, and financial wellbeing. Moreover, when we discuss emotional wellbeing in the workplace, this becomes increasingly complex as it requires a mechanism for the individual to express their emotions and communicate how they feel at work.

For this research, the wellbeing outcomes that were assessed were sleep, stress and pleasure. Our rationale and wider research supporting the selection of these outcomes can be found in our first report [here](#).

3.3 What has been shown to impact wellbeing

Some variables that have been shown to impact the above outcomes, and that we chose to incorporate within this study, include emotion expression, freedom and autonomy, barriers to performing our best work, and finding purpose and meaning in the work that we do.

The above variables are ones which we are continuing to look at and follow on from our last research paper. We again drew up some hypotheses from the above variables, including:

- Managers would report having the most ‘stuff’ get in the way of them performing their best work
- Managers would find more purpose and meaning in their work in comparison to colleagues
- Managers would report feeling the least able to express how they feel across a range of emotions as they have multiples faces to maintain in the workplace (again accounting for the fact they are perceived from multiple angles)

3.4 Framing is important

Attention was given to both the construction and word choice of the questions within this survey. The language we choose to use when monitoring emotion(s) and the way an individual feels have an important role in the interpretation of the question and, consequently, how they may choose to respond.

For example, incorporating the word “stuff” within the scaling question of “*stuff gets in the way of me performing my best work*” was a deliberate decision, as the ambiguity of the word choice here allows respondents to have greater control over their perspective on this question, with the word offering a level of interpretation which can span across a series of different dimensions. Hence, stuff may suggest things which can be categorised as interpersonal (breakdown in communication), personal (what is going on for me impacting how I perform), or perhaps external (being given extra work or being taken away from the work you need to complete).

This was another area explored in our original research report, and for a full exploration of why consideration was given to the framing of our questions then you can find the first report [here](#).

What the survey tells us

If you want managers with strong emotional wellbeing, then it is important to create a culture where managers can express how they feel across a range of emotions and where they are able to get stuff out of the way, as this research suggests that manager's wellbeing is the lowest in the workforce because they are more stressed, sleeping poorly and find the least pleasure in their work.

4. Stress

When looking at stress through the lens of level, there is a prominent difference between roles. In the last 4 weeks, 58% of directors agreed that they had felt stressed by work. This increased slightly for colleagues at 61% and increased more significantly for managers at 72%. Thus, from the three levels investigated, managers reported feeling the most stress and directors the least.

When we cross analyse the data around stress with the different wellbeing variables, we can dissect the relationship between the different areas which have shown to impact wellbeing and unveil the extent to which each of them affects stress.

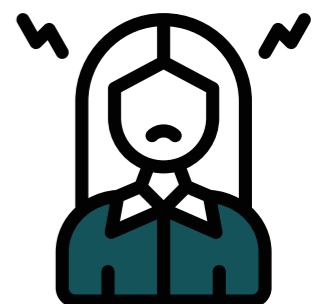
4.1 Emotion expression and stress

Firstly, emotion expression had an interesting correlation to the extent to which stress was experienced across the different levels. Of the 72% of managers who agreed they have felt stressed by work in the last 4 weeks, 83% of them said that it is not ok for them to share when they are feeling frustrated or annoyed at work, and 80% also said it is not ok for them to share when they feel overwhelmed or upset at work.

This connection was replicated across all three groups, with 72% of colleagues who reported feeling stressed in the last four weeks also saying that it is not ok for them to report feeling frustrated at work. For directors, this figure sat at 74%.

On the contrary, those who agreed that it is ok to share how they feel across a range of emotions often reported feeling less stress. For colleagues, 33% of those who said it is ok for them to share when they are feeling overwhelmed also said that they have not felt stressed in the last 4 weeks, and for directors this percentage was 37%.

Interestingly, managers were the group who reported the least impact when comparing their ability to express their emotions and how this impacted stress. Of the managers who said that it is ok to share when they feel overwhelmed at work, only 13% also agreed that they hadn't felt stressed by work in the last four weeks. When looking at expressing frustration, this percentage remained the same, with 13% of managers who say that it is ok for them to share when they are frustrated also reporting that they haven't felt stressed.



Whilst there appears to be a reasonable impact on stress when those across all levels within the workforce can express how they feel, the contrast between directors and colleagues to managers is striking. It appears that while emotion expression can have a positive effect on reducing stress in the workplace, it may be that – particularly for managers – having an outlet to express how they feel must be accompanied by other supporting structures (around the different variables that impact wellbeing) for it to be most effective.

Since the wider research, and the broader findings of this research, suggest that emotion expression appears to be one of the most (if not the most) important variables contributing to improved wellbeing, this apparent contradiction for managers is important to acknowledge here. Whilst we can provide potential reasons as to why we think this may have appeared, we recognise that additional research conducted with managers would prove more beneficial when seeking an explanation.



4.2 Barriers to performing your best work and stress

When individuals from all three levels reported that they can perform their best work without interference, they typically report experiencing less stress.

For colleagues, 41% of those who said that ‘stuff’ doesn’t get in the way of them performing their best work also said that they haven’t felt stressed in the last four weeks. For directors, this figure stood at 44%, and for managers it was 27%.

There is a significant swing here, with managers reporting that they are more likely to experience stress even if they do not have barriers impeding their ability to perform their best work.

As noted in our previous report, discreet emotion research suggests that obstruction to or interference with an individual reaching a goal is the universal trigger for anger. If anger is experienced, and the individual feels unable to express this emotion (with our findings suggesting that this is likely), then the probability that they ‘push down’ or ‘bottle up’ this feeling is high. The consequences of this can prove detrimental to the individual, their work and the organisation.



4.3 Purpose and stress

In our previous report which documented the broader findings of our research – and with findings not specific to the level of role – we found that although individuals who find purpose in their work appear to experience less stress, several respondents who report feeling stressed still find purpose in the work that they do.

This finding remained the same when filtering the responses through level. Of the 72% of managers who have felt stress in the last four weeks, 65% of them state that their work gives them a sense of purpose and meaning. For directors this figure was 58% and for colleagues it was 55%.

Finding purpose and meaning in the work that we do is important when considering factors such as enjoyment and fulfilment, which can positively impact our emotional wellbeing. This study shows that individuals across different levels within an organisation can still find purpose in their work whilst experiencing poor wellbeing outcomes. So, when we wish to consider ways that we can help those in our organisations find greater purpose in their work, we must be mindful that it may not necessarily negate negative wellbeing outcomes and, in this case, reduce the level of stress that an individual may experience.

4.4 Freedom and stress

The findings from our cross-analysis of stress and freedom have a strong parallel to the relationship shown above between stress and purpose. Again, whilst those across all levels who report that they have enough freedom to perform their best work appear to experience less stress, a significant number of those who say they have freedom also agree that they have felt stressed in the last 4 weeks.

61% of managers who report that they have freedom have also been stressed by work in the last 4 weeks.

The figures across all three levels remained consistent, with 54% of directors and 50% of colleagues reporting the same experience whereby they feel they have enough freedom and autonomy to do their best work and have felt stressed.

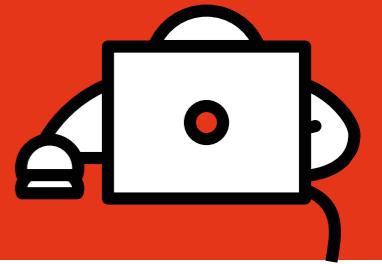


5. Sleep

Our second wellbeing outcome was sleep and, within this study, we sought to investigate whether work has kept respondents awake at night.

When we filtered the findings around sleep to assess the differences across each of the levels looked at, we found that 25% of directors agree that work keeps them awake at night. This increased slightly for colleagues (27%) and significantly for managers (44%).

Similar to the findings noted above when assessing the relationship between level and stress, managers once again report having the poorest wellbeing as work keeps them awake more than any other role.



5.1 Emotion expression and sleep

When we look at those across all levels who say that they feel unable to share when they are frustrated at work, there is a higher likelihood that work also keeps them awake. 42% of colleagues disagreed with the statement *'it is ok for me to share with others when I feel frustrated/annoyed at work'* whilst also agreeing that work keeps them awake at night. For directors this percentage was 39%, and for managers this rose, by a considerable margin, to 55%.

When we segment the data to look at expressing overwhelm or upset at work, it perhaps comes as no surprise that this also impedes the quality of sleep an individual has across each of the levels assessed. 53% of managers who feel unable to share when they are overwhelmed at work also report having work interrupt their sleep. For directors, this figure was 41% and for colleagues it was 48%.

These findings are also interesting from an emotion regulation perspective as suppressing (or repressing) emotion (because you can't express it) can negatively impact sleep. In addition, lack of sleep or poor-quality sleep inhibits effective emotion regulation.

So, there is a risk of a cycle whereby the inability to express emotions interrupts sleep which makes it harder to regulate emotions. Consequently, we then have more emotions to suppress which further interrupts our sleep.

Managers, we argue more than directors or colleagues, have a greater degree of emotional regulation and emotional labour to perform. The role of a manager involves supporting and developing the team they manage, and this consistently includes supporting the emotional regulation of their team(s). This process can result in emotional contagion or transference where the emotions the team were experiencing, are 'caught' by the manager as a way of easing the emotional burden on the team. Managers are rarely trained or equipped with the skills and strategies to deal with this process and so it 'adds' to the emotion(al) load managers experience.

In addition, managers may need to display a 'professional' or 'competent' face to their directors and their teams and so do not have an 'outlet' to express their own emotions and that they are helping their team regulate.

5.2 Barriers to performing your best work and sleep

Stuff getting in the way was found to impact sleep across all levels and to similar degrees. 50% of managers, 48% of directors and 50% of colleagues who agreed that stuff gets in the way of them performing their best work also said that work keeps them awake at night.

This finding demonstrated the most consistency in response across each of the levels, suggesting that when there is a barrier to an individual performing their best work, despite which level they work at within an organisation, this has one of the most detrimental effects on their wellbeing across all of the variables assessed.



5.3 Purpose and sleep

Those across each of the levels who stated that they find a sense of purpose and meaning in their work were less likely to have work keep them awake. 45% of managers, 56% of directors and 54% of colleagues who agreed that work gives them a sense of purpose also disagreed that they have been kept awake by work.

5.4 Freedom and sleep

As for freedom, we found that, across all levels, those who agree that they have the freedom to perform their best work are less likely to be kept awake by work; with 62% of colleagues and 54% of directors agreeing that they find freedom and that work does not keep them awake. For managers, this figure was the lowest at 44%, suggesting that their sleep is more likely to be interrupted (in comparison to other levels) irrespective of whether or not they have enough freedom.

6. Pleasure

When we segment the data around pleasure through the level of role, directors once again come out on top, with 93% agreeing that they find pleasure in the work that they do. 71% of both managers and colleagues also report finding pleasure in their work.

Whilst these statistics are promising, it is important to note here that 10% of managers report feeling no pleasure at all in the work that they do. This figure was slightly less for colleagues (7%) and a lot less for directors (1%).



6.1 Emotion expression and pleasure

Our findings indicate that the ability to express how we feel across all emotions impacts the degree to which we find pleasure in our work.

Of the managers who reported that they cannot express when they feel frustrated, 18% of them reported finding no pleasure in their work and this percentage increased to 19% for colleagues. Surprisingly, despite 24% of directors reporting that it is not ok for them to share when they feel overwhelmed at work, **none** of them reported finding no pleasure in their work.

When we look at expressing happiness, 70% of managers who said they could share when they feel happy and/or content at work also agreed that they find pleasure in their work. This figure was the same for colleagues (70%) and increased for directors (93%)

For overwhelm and/or upset, 17% of managers who said that they feel unable to express themselves when they feel overwhelmed also said that they find no pleasure in their work, with this percentage rising to 21% for colleagues. Once again, 0% of directors who reported that it is not OK for them to express overwhelm felt that they find no pleasure in their work.

This pattern of directors continuing to find pleasure in their work even though they cannot express how they feel raises two interesting questions.

- What continues to help directors find pleasure even if they have to hide how they feel?
- What are managers and colleagues missing out on that could help them continue to find pleasure in their work?

Linking back to the last section on sleep and the one before on stress, the inability to express emotion, including overwhelm does correlate with poor wellbeing outcomes. So, this suggests that even though directors are kept awake and stressed (in part) because they cannot share how they feel, they continue to find pleasure in their work.

6.2 Barriers to performing your best work and pleasure

Stuff getting in the way of individuals across all levels performing their best work also had a connection to pleasure. Of those who reported that they do not experience barriers to them performing their best work, 72% of managers, 96% of directors and 83% of colleagues also agreed that they find pleasure in the work that they do.

6.3 Purpose and pleasure

There was a markedly positive relationship between work giving respondents a sense of purpose across all levels and them finding pleasure in their work. 92% of managers who agree that they find purpose in their work also agree that they find pleasure in their work. This figure was 91% for colleagues and 97% for directors.

6.4 Freedom and pleasure

Having freedom and autonomy at work also had a positive relationship with finding pleasure across all levels. 84% of managers, 99% of directors and 85% of colleagues who reported that they have enough freedom and autonomy also reported feeling pleasure in the work that they do.

7. Conclusion

This research paper looked to assess the interplay of the level of role (director, manager and colleague) and emotional wellbeing. The wellbeing outcomes selected – based on the research and evidence around wellbeing across the wider literature – included the extent to which respondents have felt stressed by work in the last four weeks, have had their sleep interrupted by work and find pleasure in their work.

The findings of this study illustrate that, when we look at wellbeing across the three levels investigated, managers have reported the poorest level of wellbeing across all outcomes. On the other hand, directors continually report having the most positive wellbeing outcomes across the three cohorts assessed.

The outcomes across the different variables demonstrate mixed results. Whilst emotion expression has shown to improve wellbeing outcomes, we must be mindful when using it as a tool to promote positive wellbeing (particularly for managers). Although we wish to assess the reason for this swing in more detail, it may be that there must be more support in place for it to be most effective.



7.1 Areas for further exploration

There are several areas which can be considered when further exploring the interplay of an individual's level of role and emotional wellbeing – particularly when we consider the experience of managers.

From the findings of this research, we feel it important to explore why managers feel this way in the workplace. Whilst we can generate useful relationships between the variables assessed in our research and their impact on the emotional wellbeing of managers, this is achieved through a cross-analysis of pre-generated, closed questions. Therefore, it may prove valuable to conduct additional research via a qualitative approach. This allows for the findings from this research to be tested, whilst also allowing scope to unveil additional factors which contribute to the poor wellbeing of managers - and in greater detail.

Additionally, there may be value in exploring with directors what it is that helps them find pleasure in their work. In contrast to managers and colleagues, the responses from directors suggest that when they cannot express their feelings across a range of emotions, they continue to find pleasure in their work. This stark contrast may help unlock what organisations can do to sustain pleasure for directors and learn what may also help managers and colleagues as well.



7.2 Next steps

Workplace wellbeing is a phenomenon that is of growing importance and focus. Sometimes it can be hard to know the actions or choices that an individual, team or organisation can or should make to yield positive outcomes and results. While it would be a stretch too far to say these findings guarantee success, there is sufficient data to suggest that acting on the variables of:

1. Being able to express how you feel across a range of emotions
 2. Having the freedom to do your best work
 3. Finding purpose and meaning in your work
 4. Limiting stuff getting in the way
- Are likely to lead to positive outcomes against the extent to which people:
1. Feel stressed by their work
 2. Have their sleep interrupted by work
 3. Find pleasure in their work

While it may sound simple, there are cultural, systemic, and operational challenges and barriers to achieving change in these vital areas. As a consultancy that specialises in:

- Behaviour analysis and change
- Emotion in the workplace
- Evidence-based practice
- Demonstrating value

we are well placed to support your business.

In addition, we recommend specific focus, involvement, and engagement with the management population in your workforce to establish the extent to which these findings may apply and what you can do to help.



Emotion at Work is perfectly placed to support individuals, teams, and organisations to be less stressed, sleep better and find pleasure in their work. We can help you achieve those things through the following:

Managers

- Coaching
- Support and resources in the Emotion at Work Community
- The emotionally well and resilient manager development programme
- Building groups and teams that emotionally thrive at work

Supports variables

1. Expressing emotion
2. Having freedom to do your best work
3. Finding purpose and meaning in your work
4. Limiting stuff getting in the way

Colleagues

- Improved team emotional wellbeing and resilience development events
- Support and resources in the Emotion at Work Community

Directors

- Executive coaching
- Leadership development programmes
- Emotional culture diagnosis and development
- Organisational wellbeing development consultancy
- Support and resources in the Emotion at Work Community

Should you wish to find out more about the different services Emotion at Work offers, access our website here:

emotionatwork.co.uk

To access a variety of resources and assets around the topic of emotional wellbeing, register for the Emotion at Work Community here:

community.emotionatwork.co.uk/groups

To register for our mailing list, where we send out resources, hints and tips dealing with the topic of emotional wellbeing, register here:

If you want to contact Phil directly, you can do so at: phil@emotionatwork.co.uk

07977 569398





Registered in England and Wales
Company Number 07738777
Office 7,
35-37 Ludgate Hill
London
EC4M 7JN

emotionatwork.co.uk