

2021 YMCA WORKWELL WORKPLACE WELL-BEING REPORT

INSIGHTS TO IMPACT:

The Depleted, The Overworked, and The Underappreciated

Introduction

As we approach the two-year mark of the global COVID-19 pandemic, it can be easy to forget everything that our communities have gone through. We've experienced the cycle of lockdowns, easing restrictions, openings, and lockdowns again. We've had ten-person bubbles as international borders closed, celebrated birthdays over Zoom, and postponed weddings and other major life events. We've now had four different school years impacted by the pandemic, with each year and each school board having their own set of implications. It really has felt like a "new normal".

Through all of this, our experiences at work have been impacted too. We have seen many businesses in our communities temporarily close their doors due to the pandemic and too many close their doors for good. We have seen the rise of "work-from-home" and the start of the "return to work". Many of us have had to connect with people through computer screens, many more of us have had to connect with people from behind plastic dividers and masks. We have seen the start of the "[Great Resignation](#)", with employees leaving their jobs in record numbers, and the rise of the "[Burnout Epidemic](#)", with employees experiencing burnout more than ever before. It is safe to say that our collective well-being at work has been significantly challenged since the start of the pandemic.

It is undeniable that our communities have been rocked by COVID-19, but let's take a moment to appreciate the resilience that we have shown to be where we are today – both at home and at work - it really is quite astounding.

At YMCA WorkWell, a branch of the [YMCA of Three Rivers](#), we are on a mission to improve the state of workplace well-being in the communities we serve – and beyond. And this all starts with good data. We have been tracking employee well-being in our communities since the start of the pandemic, and the purpose of this *Insights to Impact Report* (our second annual report) is to share what we continue to learn. How has the pandemic impacted employee well-being in our communities? Has employee well-being evolved since the start of COVID-19? Are employees' needs changing? And what can leaders start doing today to better support employee well-being in their organizations? These are the burning questions we will tackle head-on in this report.

A Warning & A Note of Hope

At the risk of spoiling what is about to come: this is daunting data. **Employees in our communities are exhausted, overworked, and depleted, and these realities are directly contributing to the biggest challenges our workforces are facing. It is burning employees out, it is pushing employees to leave their jobs, and it is directly impacting mental health in our communities.** This is a problem that deserves to be taken seriously and the data suggests that these challenges will only persist if organizations in our communities don't commit to investing in the well-being of their teams.

The landscape of work has changed. Things will not just go back to the way they were on the other side of COVID-19, and leaders cannot simply wait for the return of what they were doing in "the great before". If we truly care about improving employee well-being in our communities, something has to change. And the data shows us that for lasting change to happen, it has to start with leadership.

With that said, we strongly believe that **even the most daunting data is good data if it can inspire action.** We hope that this report can be an important step in providing leaders and policy-makers with the knowledge and tools they need to take purposeful and targeted action as we collectively tackle this problem head-on in our communities. The best action starts with the right data – so let's do this.

A final note for context: This data was collected between September 13 and October 4, 2021. This means that these responses were collected at a time before Omicron and before another round of lockdowns in our region. At the time of this release, many of us have had to change what our work life looks like, again. As researchers, we do not have the data to clearly speak to how this new lockdown will change the narrative in this report. But as practitioners, our experiences and our data from the last two years would suggest that these new changes will only exacerbate the challenges we discuss in this report. Unfortunately, this likely represents a step back for employee well-being rather than a step forward.



YMCA WorkWell Community Survey

At YMCA WorkWell, we care about data.

Since our inception in July 2020, we have partnered with over 50 organizations to support and improve employee well-being throughout the pandemic.

Our [Insights Assessment](#) is a critical piece of that process – it is a quick and validated pulse survey that allows leaders to gain valuable insights on employee well-being, culture, engagement, and performance. We have collected feedback from over 15,000 employees across our partner organizations. Each set of results helps us identify an organization's most pressing needs so that we can directly focus strategic action on the specific areas that will have the most meaningful impact on improving employee well-being.

Even during a global pandemic, every organization has their own unique challenges to employee well-being and having the right data helps us ensure that an organization is using the right tools to address the right needs.

Our mandate is to **improve the state of workplace well-being in the communities we serve – and beyond**. This community focus means that every voice in our region matters to us, not just those working for the organizations we are lucky enough to partner with.

To ensure that we are capturing these additional voices, we have committed to using our survey to measure and report on workplace well-being in our Three Rivers communities of Waterloo Region, Guelph-Wellington, and Stratford-Perth annually as we continue to move through COVID-19 and its unique challenges – and into the new future.

We care about this community data for three main reasons:

1. It provides a voice for those that might not otherwise have one

We want to hear about the state of workplace well-being in industries, communities, and organizations that might not be prioritizing this work.

2. It can help inspire data-driven action in local organizations

We want to provide leaders with compelling data that can highlight why taking action now on employee well-being is so important.

3. It can help inspire data-driven policy changes in our communities

We want to provide community leaders with compelling data that inspires policies that put employee well-being top of mind.

This report marks our third YMCA WorkWell Workplace Well-being Report. Our first [Insights to Impact Workplace Well-being Report](#) included feedback from 1,184 working adults on their well-being at work in August 2020. Our first [Special Issue Report](#) on loneliness in our community was based on feedback collected from 1,453 working adults in March 2021.

To collect data for this third report, we distributed our survey to working adults in our communities between September 13 and October 4, 2021, through social media, YMCA newsletters, and our community partners. We received responses from 1,851 working adults, with responses coming from a wide range of backgrounds, identities, ages, and socio-economic statuses. Forty percent of respondents were working fully from home at the time of completing the survey, whereas 35% were working fully from their workplace and 25% were working some sort of hybrid arrangement. The most represented industries were education (19% of responses), technology (13%), and health care (11%) – though nearly every industry was represented in the data in some way.

In the following sections, we'll explore the current state of workplace well-being in our communities, how it compares to what we have seen pre-COVID-19 and earlier in the pandemic, and the most notable needs identified by working adults in our region.

Where Have We Been, Where Are We Now?

Where We Have Been

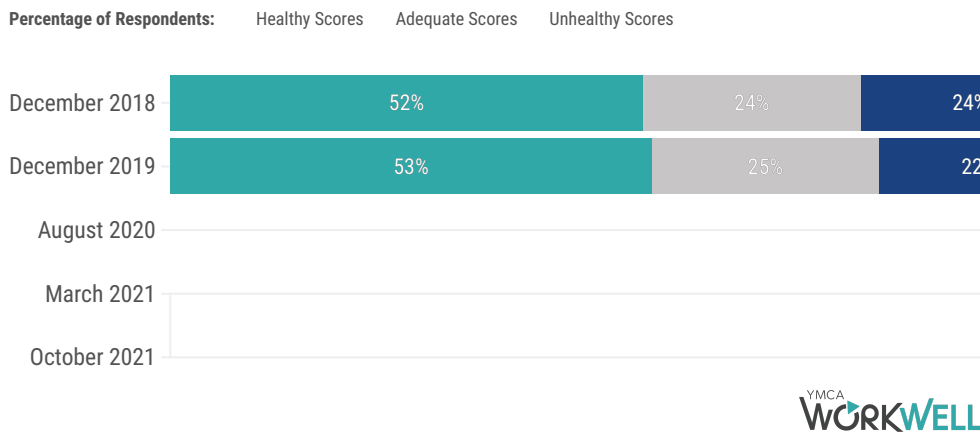
To fully understand the long-term effects of COVID-19 on employee well-being, it is important to understand where we have been. Even in the years before forming YMCA WorkWell, we have asked working adults one simple question: *"Thinking back on the last three months, how would you rate your overall well-being?"* When collecting this data in 2018 and 2019, before COVID-19 hit, there was a clear need for improved employee well-being in our communities – almost 25% of working adults reported unhealthy scores, indicating that their experiences at work were having a detrimental effect on their personal well-being (see Figure 1).

To put that into perspective, one of every four colleagues on your team was likely feeling unhealthy at work prior to COVID-19 – maybe that was you. However, there were clear bright spots too: over 50% of employees reported healthy well-being scores during that time, suggesting that most adults were lucky enough to have relatively healthy working experiences in our communities.

Figure 1

OVERALL WELL-BEING

"Thinking back on the last three months, how would you rate your overall well-being?"



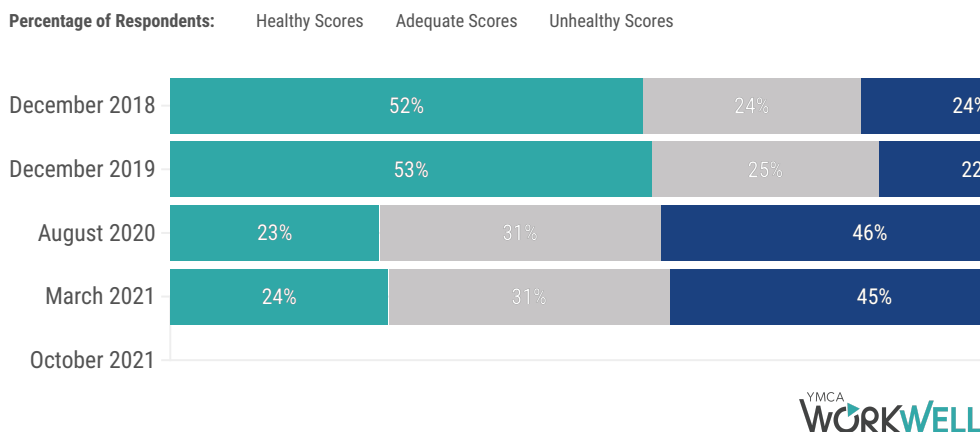
COVID-19 changed all of this.

The unique pressures, shock, and uncertainty of COVID-19 had a near-immediate effect on employee well-being in our communities. By August 2020, just five months into the pandemic, the percentage of working adults in our region reporting unhealthy well-being scores more than doubled, jumping from 22% to 46%. Nearly every second person in the region was experiencing unhealthy well-being at work. Equally alarming, the percentage of respondents with healthy scores also dropped substantially, falling from 53% to 23%, not even half of the numbers seen in 2019. By March 2021, one full year into the pandemic, there were no real signs of progress; scores had remained virtually unchanged since the start of the pandemic with 45% of working adults responding with unhealthy well-being scores (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

OVERALL WELL-BEING

"Thinking back on the last three months, how would you rate your overall well-being?"



Even one year into COVID-19, we continued to see real and lasting effects of the pandemic on workplace well-being. That brings us to today – where are we now?

Where We Are Now: Feeling the COVID Weight

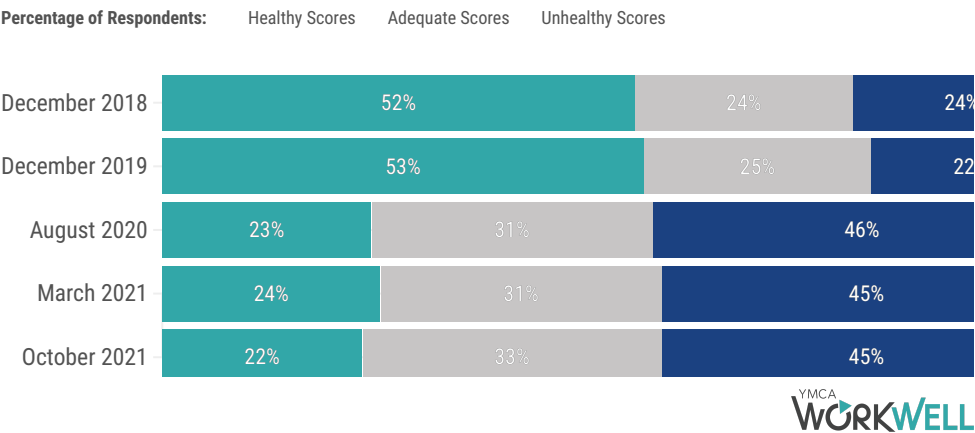
We’ve been living with COVID-19 for nearly two years, and there are many reasons why some might expect to see the start of a turnaround - even despite this most recent round of lockdowns. We have had time to adjust to our “new normal” at work – whether that is behind a desk at a new home office or behind a plexiglass shield in the workplace. We’ve seen “wellness” become a regular talking point at work and at home. We’ve seen vaccination rates quickly climb. Together, those changes might feel worthy of some cautious optimism looking forward.

Unfortunately, the data suggests otherwise.

Figure 3

OVERALL WELL-BEING

"Thinking back on the last three months, how would you rate your overall well-being?"



The responses from this round of community data suggest that this recovery is yet to start (see Figure 3). Perhaps the most striking takeaway from these results is the sheer consistency in employee well-being scores throughout the pandemic. The percentage of respondents reporting unhealthy scores has remained at 45% – statistically, unchanged from scores in both March 2021 and August 2020, and more than double pre-pandemic levels. Put simply, the pressures of the pandemic continue to strain workplace well-being in our communities, and we still have a long way to go before we start to see a genuine turnaround.

A big part of this is down to one simple reality: **Employees are depleted.** Nearly two years of relentless uncertainty in the workplace, along with a never-ending stream of social, economic, and financial pressures are draining. Many employees in our communities are understandably struggling to keep afloat – and it is burning them out.

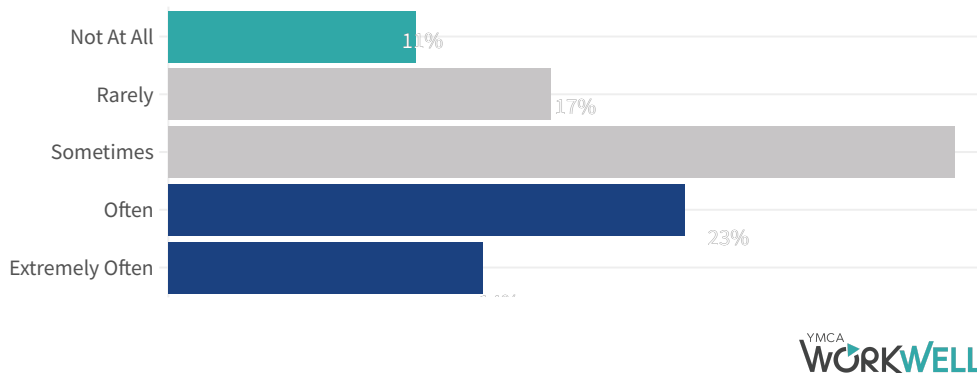
Burnout and Mental Health in the Workplace

The [World Health Organization](#) first recognized [burnout](#), defined as “a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed,” in the [International Classification of Diseases](#) in 2019 – one year before the pandemic hit. During COVID-19, however, burnout has hit all-time highs in the workplace and our data suggests that our communities are suffering from what some are calling a [burnout epidemic](#) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

THE RISE OF BURNOUT

"Burnout is defined as chronic workplace stress that has not been managed. According to this definition, how often do you believe that you have experienced burnout in the past three months?"



Specifically, when asked how frequently they have experienced burnout, 73% of respondents reported that they have experienced burnout at least sometimes in the last three months – compared to only 11% of respondents reporting that they have not experienced burnout at all. Perhaps most eye-opening, 37% reported experiencing burnout “often” or “extremely often.” This perfectly mirrors research that our YMCA WorkWell team conducted with burnout experts Jennifer Moss, Christina Maslach, and Michael Leiter for [Harvard Business Review](#) earlier this year, which found that 89% of people feel as though their work-life has gotten worse since the start of the pandemic.

What does this mean? Our experiences at work are affecting well-being in our communities in a very real way.

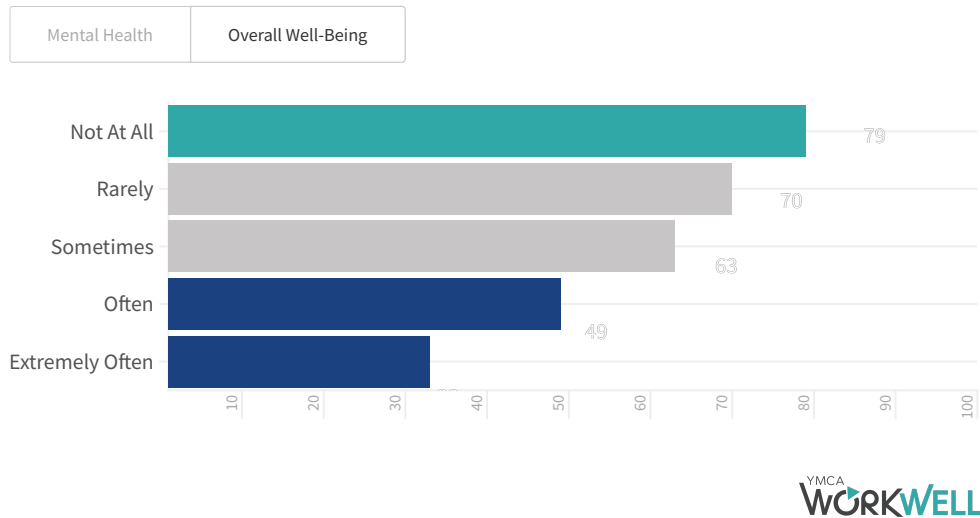
While burnout is centred around the workplace, we also asked respondents about their overall well-being and their mental health over the last three months – not just in the workplace. Figure 5 illustrates the significant differences in average mental health and overall well-being scores based on how often respondents believe they have experienced burnout at work in the last three months.

Figure 5

THE EFFECT OF BURNOUT ON OUR WELL-BEING

Average Mental Health and Overall Well-Being scores on a scale of 1-100 by how often respondents have experienced Burnout in the last three months

Use the boxes to toggle between health scores



This is a serious cause for concern. At YMCA WorkWell, we categorize any score of 60 and below as “unhealthy” – this is the point where our analyses indicate that individuals’ experiences begin to have a detrimental impact on their overall health. Now look at Figure 5 again. The average mental health scores of respondents reporting burnout “often” or “extremely often” in the last three months fall well below this threshold – that represents 37% of respondents. The average mental health scores of respondents reporting burnout “sometimes” is teetering on that edge – representing another 35% of respondents. That is 72% of respondents reporting unhealthy or nearing unhealthy mental health scores.

Worryingly, these results are indicative of a larger narrative: **The ongoing erosion of mental health in our communities.** Perhaps most importantly, these mental health challenges are being experienced across our entire population. Figure 6 illustrates these trends and allows you to toggle through average mental health scores for different demographic breakouts - current work location, current position, tenure, employment status, children at home, age, respondent-identified gender, respondent-identified minority status, and respondent-identified sexual orientation.

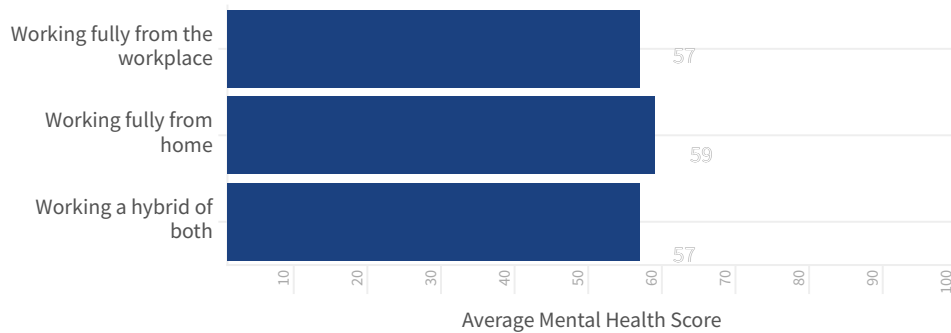
Figure 6

AVERAGE MENTAL HEALTH SCORES BY GROUP

"Thinking back on the last three months, how would you rate your mental health?"

Use the dropdown to toggle between different demographics

Current Work Location ▼



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While there are some notable differences within these comparisons – for example, we see particularly low scores among LGBTQ2S+ respondents, non-binary respondents, and respondents in their 20s – the clearest trend in this data is how wide and pervasive these challenges are. **Nearly every group surveyed had an average mental health score within a 5-point spread between 55 and 60 – scores that fall within that “unhealthy” range of mental health scores.** This is a level of consistency across groups that we rarely see in this type of community data.

Do you see yourself in these numbers and want your organization to take action?



It should be noted that **these mental health challenges are not solely due to respondents’ experiences in the workplace.** The pandemic has impacted mental health in our communities in so many ways – from increased uncertainty and loneliness to the loss of so many of our community outlets that support collective physical, social, and mental health. However, in a world where many of us spend at least half of our waking hours working, it is undeniable that our experiences at work have contributed to these challenges in important ways, and many people are coming into their workplace every day carrying these challenges on their shoulders. We’re also starting to see the effects of these mental health challenges on the economy.

“The Great Resignation” Through a Well-Being Lens

One of the biggest people and culture challenges during COVID-19 has been the “Great Resignation,” with employees leaving their jobs in record numbers. This level of turnover has significant implications for organizations. Research suggests that the cost of losing just one employee can range from tens of thousands of dollars to over twice the employee's annual salary, and these numbers have likely only continued to rise given the current talent shortages in our communities.

This trend was front and centre in our data – 34% of respondents had started a new job during COVID-19 and 25% of respondents still in their pre-COVID jobs were either expecting to leave or open to leaving their current role in the next six months. **That is 51% of respondents that had either started a new job during COVID-19 or were seriously considering leaving their current job in the next six months.**

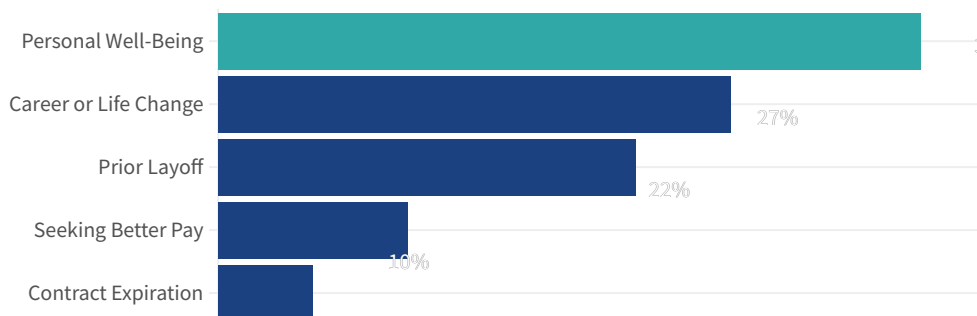
This begs the question: **Why are people leaving?** To find out, we asked them. For respondents who started a new job during COVID-19 we asked, “Your responses indicate that you have started a new job during COVID-19. What drove that change?” We then coded these qualitative comments into themes to identify the main trends (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

WHY ARE EMPLOYEES LEAVING THEIR JOBS?

34% of respondents started a new job during COVID-19.

"Your responses indicate that you have started a new job during COVID-19. What drove that change?"



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There were several reasons why respondents started new jobs during COVID-19. Some reasons were to be expected – for example, 27% of respondents started a new job due to a general career or life change, like looking for a new challenge, moving to a new city or graduating from school, while 22% started a new role due to being laid off from a prior role, and 5% because a previous contract role expired. The most common reason that people started a new role, however, was their personal well-being: **37% of respondents cited a reason related to their well-being such as an unmanageable workload, a lack of appreciation, or a desire to find a role that allowed them the flexibility to work in a way that benefitted their well-being and their family's well-being.** Only 10% of responses cited pay as their primary driver for leaving.

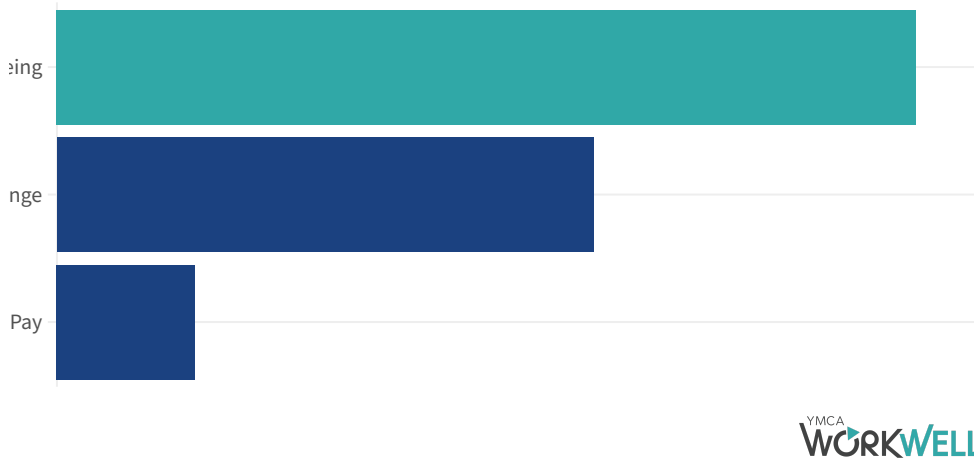
We also asked respondents who were considering leaving their job in the next six months: “What is making you consider leaving your job in the next six months?” and results were very similar (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

WHY ARE EMPLOYEES THINKING OF LEAVING?

25% of respondents in their pre-COVID jobs were strongly considering leaving their current role in the next six months.

"What is making you consider leaving your job in the next six months??"



Once again, personal well-being was the most cited reason – feeling burnt out, feeling overworked, and feeling unappreciated – with 56% of responses. A desire for a new challenge or new opportunity made up 35% of responses and a desire for better pay made up just 9% of responses. To be clear, this does not mean that pay does not matter or does not drive turnover – it certainly can and does. It also does not mean that those seeking a healthier work environment aren't also looking for better pay – in fact, there are few things that shine a light on pay dissatisfaction more than an unhealthy work environment. But, when we asked respondents to provide just one thing that is driving turnover, it was concerns over personal well-being that dominated the conversation.

This clear link between well-being and turnover should ring alarm bells for leaders. At YMCA WorkWell, we strongly believe that employee well-being shouldn't be a means to an end. We want organizations to care about employee well-being and mental health because it matters and their people deserve to be cared for. Period. But this data also suggests that not prioritizing well-being in your culture can be detrimental to your bottom line and can accelerate turnover, something that should be top of mind for all leaders now and in the coming years.

This poses the question: **If you care about supporting employee well-being in your organization, where should you start?** In our experience, the best way to identify a group's needs is to ask them. So that's what we did. In the following section, we outline the top needs identified by respondents, how these needs have evolved over the course of the pandemic, and what leaders can start doing today to address them.

Are you a leader ready to make real, lasting change to your workplace culture? We're here to help.

It's Time to Act: Where Should Leaders Start?

At YMCA WorkWell, we believe that data means nothing without actionable insights. There is one clear story in this data: **Many employees in our community are struggling and *continue* to struggle with their well-being at work.** Make no mistake – this is a crisis, and we will not be able to turn this around without effective and targeted action by leaders.

What is the responsibility of leaders to address these challenges? It might be easier to start with what it's not. We do not believe that it is a leader's responsibility to "make employees healthy." Well-being is a multi-faceted and complex issue – there are so many factors influencing well-being that are outside of a leader's control that it is truly an impossible task to be responsible for the health of every single employee. However, **we do believe that it is a leader's responsibility to create the workplace conditions that support employee well-being while working towards common goals.**

This is an important distinction. As you will see in the following section, many of the most significant challenges to employee well-being today are deep, systemic challenges that require purposeful and targeted top-down action by leaders first and foremost. And after seeing nearly two years' worth of data during COVID-19 with little to no change, it is clear that we need to start doing something differently if we truly want workplace well-being to improve.

Today's Top Workplace Well-Being Needs – What the Data Tells Us

At a time when so many of us are depleted, employees and leaders alike, using our energy in the most effective ways becomes especially important. If we can only focus our limited energy on one or two areas that would have the largest impact on improving workplace well-being in our communities, what should they be? To answer this question, we need to identify employees' greatest needs. We presented respondents with the following question: "Of the following, what do you need more of to feel like you are able to be at your best at work? (Please select all that apply)," followed by a list of targeted items that might better support their well-being in the workplace (e.g., Mental health supports; More empathy and understanding from leaders; Clearer communication from senior leadership, etc.; see Appendix A for the full list of options). These options were then ranked according to which needs were identified most often.

Assessing respondents' top needs today compared to those in August 2020 paints a compelling picture of how employee well-being challenges have evolved during COVID-19 (see Figure 9). The most common needs identified by respondents in August 2020, five months into the pandemic, were largely oriented around uncertainty and isolation: Flexible working arrangements, clearer communication from leaders, team connection opportunities, and clearer role expectations. These needs made sense given the landscape in the early months of the pandemic. Many working adults in lockdown, isolated from their colleagues as

organizations were struggling to maintain healthy cultures and create new expectations in an uncertain working world that looked and felt very different – regardless of where they worked.

Figure 9

HOW EMPLOYEES' NEEDS HAVE CHANGED DURING COVID-19

"What do you need more of to feel like you are able to be at your best at work?"
Top four most commonly selected answers in August 2020 and October 2021

August 2020 - Top Four Needs

#1 - Flexible work arrangements

#2 - Clearer communication from leaders

#3 - Team connection opportunities

#4 - Clearer role expectations

October 2021 - Top Four Needs

#1 - Better work-life balance

#2 - More manageable workload

#3 - To feel personally appreciated

#4 - Clearer communication from leaders



In October 2021, the unrivalled uncertainty of the early pandemic had started to subside, and these needs have evolved along with our collective work experiences. Specifically, the top needs identified by respondents were a better work-life balance, more manageable workload, and to feel more appreciated at work. A need for clearer communication from leaders came in as the fourth most identified need – the only need that remained in the top four across both time points.

This marks a notable shift from August 2020 and paints a picture of where the biggest challenges to employee well-being currently lie in our communities:

Employees are depleted. Employees are overworked. And employees want to feel personally valued and appreciated for their monumental efforts during the pandemic.

Does this sound like you and your colleagues?



These are the areas that are impacting employee well-being today and they require different actions than the need for increased clarity and connection that we saw last year.

These trends were compounded further by respondents' comments. To better understand the type of mental health supports employees are seeking, we asked: *"In your own words, if your organization could offer or do one thing to support your mental health at work, what do you think would be most effective?"* We received 1,044 comments and coded every response into key themes and sub-themes to identify the top insights. Figure 10 illustrates the top four themes.

Figure 10

WHAT MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS DO EMPLOYEES WANT?

"If your organization could offer or do one thing to support your mental health at work, what do you think would be most effective?"

Top four most commonly identified trends in October 2021

Top Four Mental Health Needs

#1 - Reduced Workload

#2 - Mental Health Days They Can Use

#3 - Flexible Work Options

#4 - Empathy from Leadership



When discussing "mental health supports at work," many leaders are quick to jump to traditional supports like Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and mental health benefits. These benefits, like ensuring that employees have easy and anonymous access to mental health professionals, counsellors, and therapists, are critical components of any effective organizational well-being strategy. Other leaders may turn to wellness-centric initiatives like meditation app subscriptions or lunch-time yoga to help employees cope with the stress experienced in their roles.

It is important to note, however, that when asked, **most respondents were looking first and foremost for upstream solutions to minimize their stress at work rather than downstream initiatives to help them manage that stress.** Rather than meditation apps to help manage workload, employees were asking for a reduced workload. Rather than access to a counsellor when they experience burnout, employees were asking for mental health days that they can take before they hit that point. In fact, across all 1,044 comments, only 4% of responses said that easier access to a therapist would be the most effective way to support their mental health at work, and less than 1% mentioned meditation or yoga. On the other hand, **49% of responses cited a reduced workload or better access to mental health days as the most effective way to support their mental health at work – every second respondent.** This data suggests that it is time to start looking upstream in our efforts to support employee well-being and mental health.

This is perhaps the biggest shift in the data from August 2020 to now. Last year, the data suggested that supporting mental health in the workplace required more: More clarity, more flexibility, more connection.

Today, however, **the data suggests that supporting mental health in the workplace often requires less: Less workload, less expectations, and less judgment so employees can effectively reset and recharge.**

Managing Workload – Our Biggest Threat to Workplace Well-Being in 2021

If there is one clear trend in this data, it is this: **Unmanageable workloads are currently the biggest threat to workplace well-being in our communities.** Let's be clear at the outset: Workload is an incredibly complex phenomenon, and it is not easy to manage – especially right now. For many, the amount of work on their plates has only continued to increase throughout the pandemic. When factoring in higher turnover rates, this means that many organizations in our communities have been tasked with doing more with less – leading to increasingly demanding workloads.

On top of this, our capacity to manage workload has also been depleted. [Research](#) suggests that increased levels of exhaustion diminish our ability to perform at our best, and this data clearly demonstrates that employees in our communities are exhausted. Think of it like a battery: With enough time, a healthy battery can recharge from 0% to 100% health. However, when a battery starts to lose its capacity, its peak charge is only a fraction of what it once was: A battery with only 75% capacity can only ever charge back to 75%, even under the right conditions. This represents many people in our communities today and it provides an explanation of why it has felt so hard for so many to stay on top of even a typical workload. Together, this means that **many employees in our communities are facing increasingly daunting workloads with diminished capacities, and it has created an epidemic of exhaustion in our region.**

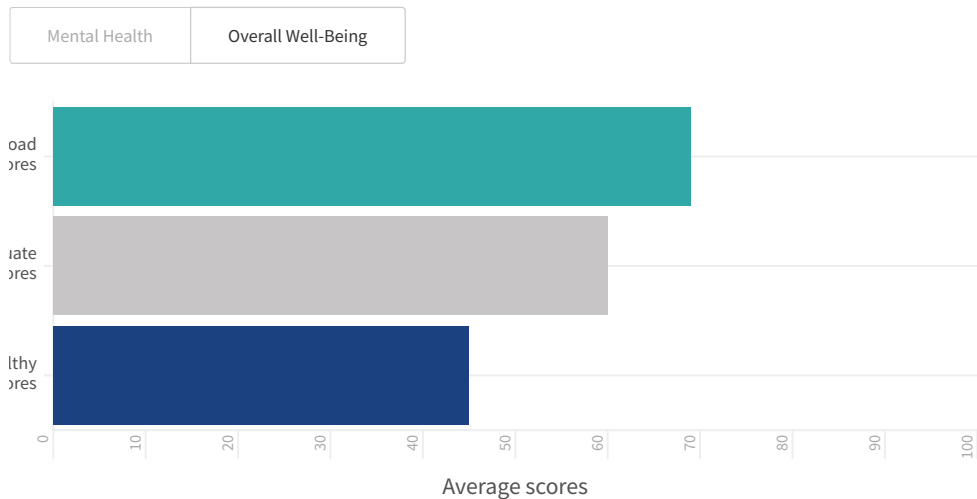
While there are definite challenges to effectively managing workload, our data suggests that it is the foremost upstream threat to employee well-being today. We have seen repeated calls in the public discourse for better work-life balance, more accessible EAPs, and more mental health days during COVID-19 – it is important to note, however, that these are often *downstream* needs created by an inability to keep up with job demands. Instead – most employees are asking for *upstream* solutions that deal with their workload, often the root cause of their fatigue, burnout, and poor well-being. Figure 11 helps to visualize how the inability to manage one's workload is related to employee mental health and well-being.

Figure 11

HOW DOES WORKLOAD AFFECT EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING?

"I feel as though I am able to adequately manage my workload."

Use the boxes to toggle between health scores



Respondents who feel like they can adequately manage their workload scored 24-points higher on both mental health and overall well-being than respondents who cannot – a significant difference and a powerful reminder of how workload can affect our health.

Importantly, these workload challenges are not an isolated issue. Forty-nine percent of all respondents reported having a need for a more manageable workload or better work-life balance; however, workload was an even bigger concern in some important segments. For example, a need for more manageable workload and better work-life balance was reported by 79% of respondents indicating that they experienced burnout “often” or “extremely often” in the last three months, and by 65% of respondents who expect to leave their job in the next six months. This suggests that **while turnover might be a contributing factor in COVID-19 workload challenges, an unmanageable workload is also a critical factor that employees consider when deciding to leave.**

So where can leaders start? The complex answer is “it depends.” There are so many factors involved with addressing workload that there will never be a silver bullet that can fix the problem. The best place to start will always be through a careful and thorough analysis of your own unique workload challenges as an organization. However, here are some ideas that can set you in the right direction:

1. Get Crystal Clear on Priorities



2. Offer a Mental Health Day... That Employees Can Actually Use



3. Take Steps to Minimize Work-Life Creep



One reason why excessive workload has such a significant impact on well-being is that it can “creep” into employees’ home lives as well. There are many workplace experiences that impact employee well-being primarily at work; for example, poor communication, unclear feedback, the inability to speak up at work – these experiences can all affect employee well-being, but their consequences are largely contained to the workplace itself. Excessive workload is different – the term “work-life balance” has become commonplace because unmanaged workload will often creep into the homes of employees through working longer hours, increased anxiety over an ever-present to-do list, and the inability to shut off. **This is part of what makes workload such an important and timely topic: It often affects employees’ well-being at work as well as their well-being at home.**

There are some simple places that you can start as a leader to help reduce this work-life creep. For example, leaders in more traditional 9-5 cultures can set “quiet times” during specific hours where work emails and messages are not sent – for example, from 7pm to 7am. Sending late-night emails or messages can create a culture around working late into the evenings – even if they are well-intentioned and you do not expect others to follow your lead. Many email services now allow for email scheduling, so you can write an email but delay its delivery until the morning at a pre-determined time.

For teams working more flexible hours where employees may choose to work evenings, consider the opposite: Create a culture where employees are expected to turn off personal notifications outside of their personal working hours. One of the biggest challenges of work-life creep is that employees cannot choose when the work comes to *them*. In a culture where each employee is in control of their own personal notifications, however, they can regain control and choose to receive emails and messages at a time that works best for their own personal well-being – whether that is early morning, late at night, or 9-5. For these policies to be most effective, leaders need to trust their employees, communicate effectively, and walk the walk themselves – but by providing employees with the choice on *how* and *when* they would like to engage with their work, leaders can take big steps towards minimizing how much work creeps into the home life of their employees.

Creating a Culture of Appreciation

Take a moment to think about the best leaders and mentors you’ve had throughout your career. What made them stand out? There is one common distinguishing factor that probably stands out to you, regardless of your experiences: that leader made you feel valued as an employee and as an individual. Feeling valued has always been an [important predictor of our mental health at work](#), but our data suggests that this need has only become more prominent as the pandemic has worn on.

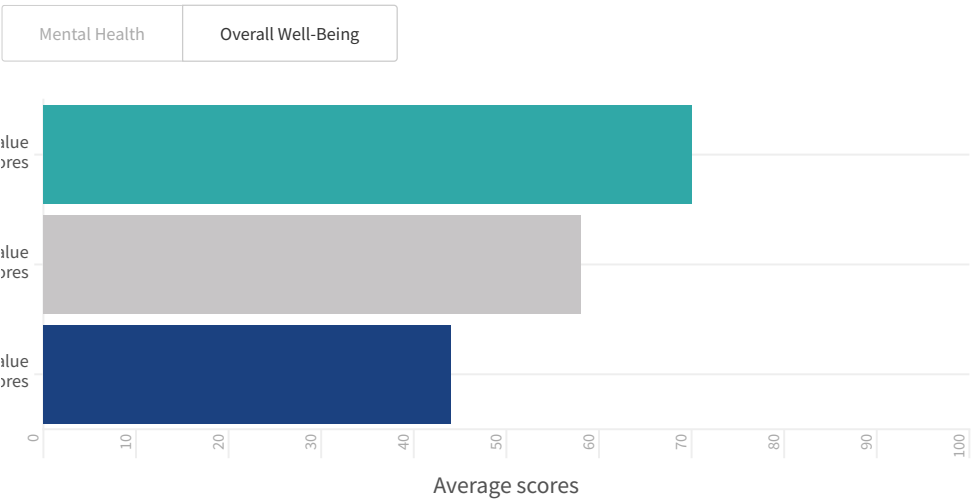
As workload challenges have grown and employees have been asked to do more with less, many employees are understandably looking to feel appreciated for their monumental efforts throughout the pandemic. We see this quite clearly in the data, as the need to feel more appreciated at work was one of the highest ranked needs by respondents – only falling behind work-life balance and a reduced workload. Our results also shine a light on why: The undeniable mental health and well-being benefits to feeling valued at work (see Figure 12).

Figure 12

THE WELL-BEING EFFECTS OF FEELING VALUED AT WORK

"I feel like I am a valued member of my organization"

Use the boxes to toggle between health scores



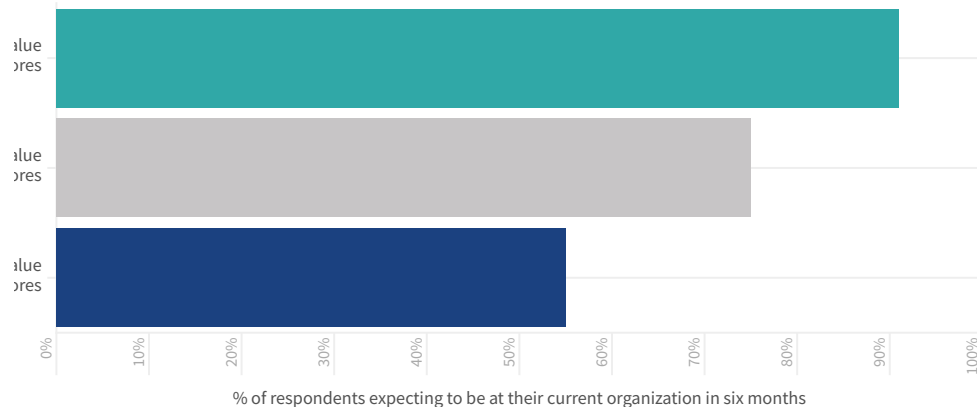
Average mental health scores of respondents who reported healthy value scores were 26 points higher than those of respondents reporting unhealthy scores, and average overall well-being scores were 24 points higher – that is a significant difference.

Importantly, these benefits do not stop at employee well-being. Our results also suggest that feeling valued at work is one of the strongest factors in preventing turnover. With the [Great Resignation](#) well underway, this is a significant competitive advantage. Figure 13 illustrates these effects – **91% of respondents who reported healthy value scores expected to be working at their organization in six months’ time, compared to only 55% of respondents reporting unhealthy value scores.** In other words, every second respondent who does not feel valued at work is considering other opportunities in the next six months. That relates directly to an organization’s bottom line.

Figure 13

EMPLOYEES WHO FEEL VALUED ARE LESS LIKELY TO LEAVE

Percentage of respondents expecting to still be at their current organization in six months.
Feeling Valued: "I feel like I am a valued member of my organization."



What can you do? Creating a culture of appreciation where employees feel adequately valued is a critical part of a healthy, committed, and engaged workplace culture, especially during COVID-19. So where should leaders start? In our workshop on [Creating a Culture of Appreciation](#), we discuss how leaders need to show employees that they both **fit in** and **stand out** to build this culture most effectively.

Helping employees fit in through fairness and inclusion is important because it signals that they belong. One of the most effective ways to do this is through including employees in decision-making processes, particularly decisions that affect them. Employee surveys can be a [great tool](#) to facilitate this process, as they allow leaders to capture the full spectrum of all employee voices before implementing significant decisions that might affect their experiences at work.

Helping employees stand out is also important because it signals that they bring their own, unique value to the organization. This is often done through effective feedback, recognition, and appreciation. One of the most effective ways to help employees feel like they stand out is by explaining the *why*. Saying "thank you" to an employee for their contributions is a great starting point, but clearly explaining *why* their unique contributions meant so much to you will go much further in helping employees feel valued. This is where many formal recognition programs fall short. **Employee recognition focuses on *what* the employee has done, but employee appreciation focuses on *who* the employee is. To truly build a culture where employees feel adequately valued, leaders need to be mindful of both.**

Altogether, creating a culture of appreciation is just one step in supporting employee well-being and mental health during COVID-19 – albeit an important one. It cannot fully eradicate the stressors of workload or a poor work-life balance; however, the respondents with the lowest mental health scores of any group were those who did not feel valued at work while dealing with an unmanageable workload. Given the time and resources required to meaningfully restructure workload, putting in the work to create a culture of appreciation may be the simplest place to start right now.

Providing Flexible Work Arrangements

The final trend in the data was a continued need for flexible work arrangements such as accommodating working hours, and hybrid or work-from-home models. This was the top need identified by respondents in August 2020 and it might have been a surprise that it was not even in the top four needs at the time of this report (see Figure 9). It was a surprise to us too, considering it still poses a significant challenge for many organizations and leaders in our communities. So, we did some digging.

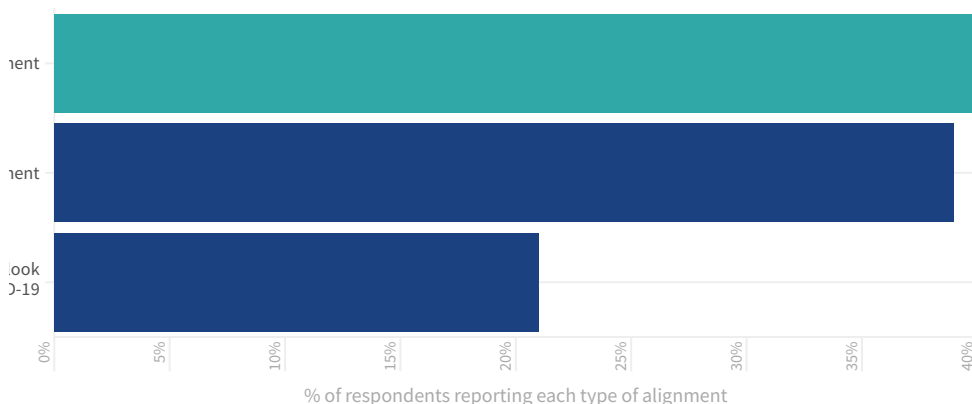
What explains this discrepancy? **Flexible work has become a story of the haves and the have-nots in our communities.** Since the dawn of the pandemic, many organizations with the resources, means, and ability to do so have been able to create new policies to promote flexibility in working hours and/or locations for their employees. Many employees in industries like technology, finance, and insurance *have* been able to benefit from more flexible work-from-home options, while many front-line employees in industries like education, health care, retail, and manufacturing *have not* had the same opportunities. In other words, while the overall community-level need might not be as high as it was in August 2020, a deep need still exists in certain pockets of our communities, often affecting employees with lower socio-economic status and employees from marginalized communities the most. This is supported by the fact that flexible work arrangements were still identified by respondents as one of the clearest things that an organization can do to support mental health at work (see Figure 10).

To better understand this growing gap in our communities, we asked respondents two questions: *"If you could choose, where would you ideally like to work?"* and *"What are your organization's current plans for you and your work after the pandemic?"* When analyzing this data, we were most interested in the **alignment** or **misalignment** between these responses. For example, the opportunity to work entirely from home is a benefit to someone who wants to work from home for their own well-being (i.e., alignment), but it can be a stressor for someone who would rather work from their workplace instead (i.e., misalignment). Figure 14 illustrates the percentage of respondents in each bucket.

Figure 14

ALIGNMENT IN THE "RETURN TO WORK"

Are employees' post-COVID work locations aligned with where they would ideally like to be working? (e.g., Is someone who would like to work from home able to work from home?)

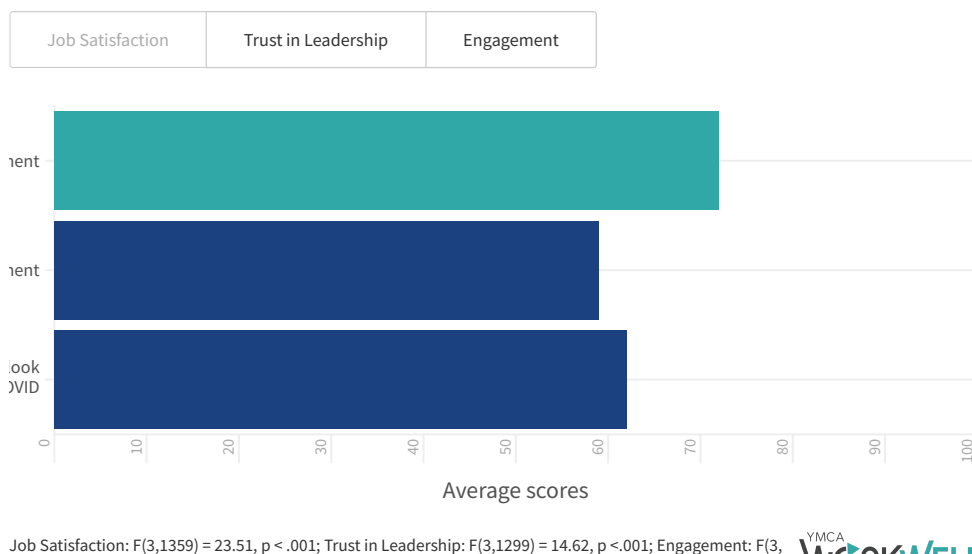


This highlights a stark divide in our communities – 40% of respondents reported alignment between how they would ideally like to work and their organization's plans for their work post-COVID-19, whereas 39% of respondents reported misalignment, and 21% of respondents did not have clarity around how their work will look after COVID-19. This experience of misalignment can also have meaningful effects on employees' work experiences. Figure 15 illustrates these differences across key outcomes such as job satisfaction, trust in leadership, and engagement.

Figure 15

WHY ALIGNMENT MATTERS

Scores on key outcomes based on whether employees' post-COVID work locations are aligned with where they would ideally likely to be working (e.g., Is someone who would like to work from home able to work from home?)



Respondents who reported an alignment between how they would like to work and where they will be working post-COVID-19 showed significantly higher scores on job satisfaction, trust, and engagement than those reporting a misalignment. Perhaps most interesting, employees who were unsure of what their work would look like after COVID-19 scored similarly to those who were experiencing misalignment. This suggests that the continued uncertainty around what work will look like can be just as detrimental to employees' work experiences as the certainty that their experiences will not be what works best for their well-being.

So where can leaders start?

1. Control is the Real Driver of Flexibility and Well-Being

One common misconception we have seen during COVID-19 is the belief that working from home is a perk in and of itself – but working from home is not necessarily a perk when it is mandatory. **What is a perk for employees, however, is having the control to engage with their work in whatever way works best for their personal well-being** – for some, that might be starting late and working evenings to best care for their children; for others, that might be working entirely from home; and for others, that might be working a traditional 9-5 from their office. The well-being needs of every single employee are different – this is why the biggest driver of well-being is being able to choose a working arrangement

that best suits their own unique needs. Without this control, leaders are often just providing a new inflexible work arrangement under the guise of flexible work.

While providing this type of control is more challenging in certain industries and roles, there are almost always ways to inject some degree of control into an employee's work-life – whether through *how* they work, *when* they work, *where* they work, or *what* they do at work. Even if you are limited in the ability to change work hours and locations, finding new ways to provide employees with some degree of control over their work will be one big step towards creating a healthier work environment.

2. Be Decisive and Be Clear



We know that implementing flexible work arrangements can be overwhelming. It is challenging in practice and requires a great deal of coordination, planning, and restructuring to be effective. But there is one undeniable truth: **COVID-19 has changed the narrative around how we are able to work, and as the number of people experiencing flexible work continues to grow, expectations will continue to grow too.** Leaders need to be aware that if they are unwilling or unable to offer some sort of flexible opportunities moving forward, it will not only affect employee well-being and satisfaction, but it will also impact the employees they are able to attract and the employees they are able to keep unless they can develop clear strategies to support employees in other ways.

Looking Ahead

This is a lot. We know that this is daunting data and, like you, we had hoped that these results would start to show the beginning of a recovery that matched our incremental recovery from the pandemic itself. But we are not there – **yet.** And this has only been compounded further by another round of lockdowns and rising COVID-19 numbers. Employee well-being continues to be under threat in our communities in record numbers and employees' needs have clearly shifted towards a need for more manageable work demands and appreciation. Employees in our communities are exhausted, overworked, and depleted, and these challenges will not subside if organizations in our communities don't make workplace well-being a priority.

So, let's finish back where we started: **Even the most daunting data is good data if it can inspire action.** Let this data be the spark that we need to take these challenges seriously, to stop only trying to fix upstream problems with downstream solutions, and to stop hoping that these challenges will simply go away on their own. **Our communities cannot be healthy if we aren't healthy at work too,** so let's take the purposeful and targeted action that we need to really turn this around. It starts with all of us, but right now, it must start from the top. It's time to take it seriously.

Book a free 30-minute consultation

Schedule a complimentary 30-minute consultation with an expert from our team to discuss the challenges your organization may be experiencing and how YMCA WorkWell can help.

[Book now](#)

We're here to help.

We're here for good.

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We're Here for Good

For more than 150 years, the YMCA has been devoted to building healthy and connected communities across our Three Rivers communities (Guelph, Stratford-Perth, and Waterloo Region). As a charitable organization, our aim is to create a positive and lasting impact on the communities we serve.

Throughout our history, we've worked to ensure that our programming and services meet our communities where they're at. **Now, more than ever, your community, your Y, needs you. Without you, there is no Y.**

This data underscores why we're here. This is our commitment: **To be here for good.** To build stronger, more vibrant, healthier communities – one connection at a time. But, we can only do it with your support.

We need you to keep showing up with us. To continue meeting our communities' needs. To continue building safe, welcoming spaces to learn, grow, thrive, and connect. Not just today. But every day.

Think of all the good we've done. Now, imagine all the good we can do, together. Learn more about how to support our Y: [ThisIsY.ca/Donate](https://thisisy.ca/Donate)

"Of the following, what do you need more of to feel like you are able to be at your best at work? (Please select all that apply)"

- A more manageable workload
- A more conducive home workstation
- A more flexible working arrangement
- Better work-life balance
- Child care supports
- Clearer communication from senior leadership
- More timely communication from senior leadership
- More transparent communication from senior leadership
- Clearer communication from my supervisor
- More timely communication from my supervisor
- Clarity around what is expected of me in my role
- Clarity around my organization's COVID-19 policies
- Clarity around my organization's "return to work" plans
- Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion initiatives
- Financial supports
- More training and development opportunities
- More empathy and understanding from my leaders
- Mental health supports
- Opportunities to connect with my team
- Physical health supports
- Recognition from my supervisor
- Support from my team
- To feel more appreciated personally
- To feel safe and protected from COVID-19
- Other (if applicable, please specify)



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