

# Employee Wellbeing in the 'New Normal'

UK & Ireland

**Achievers**

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## Achievers

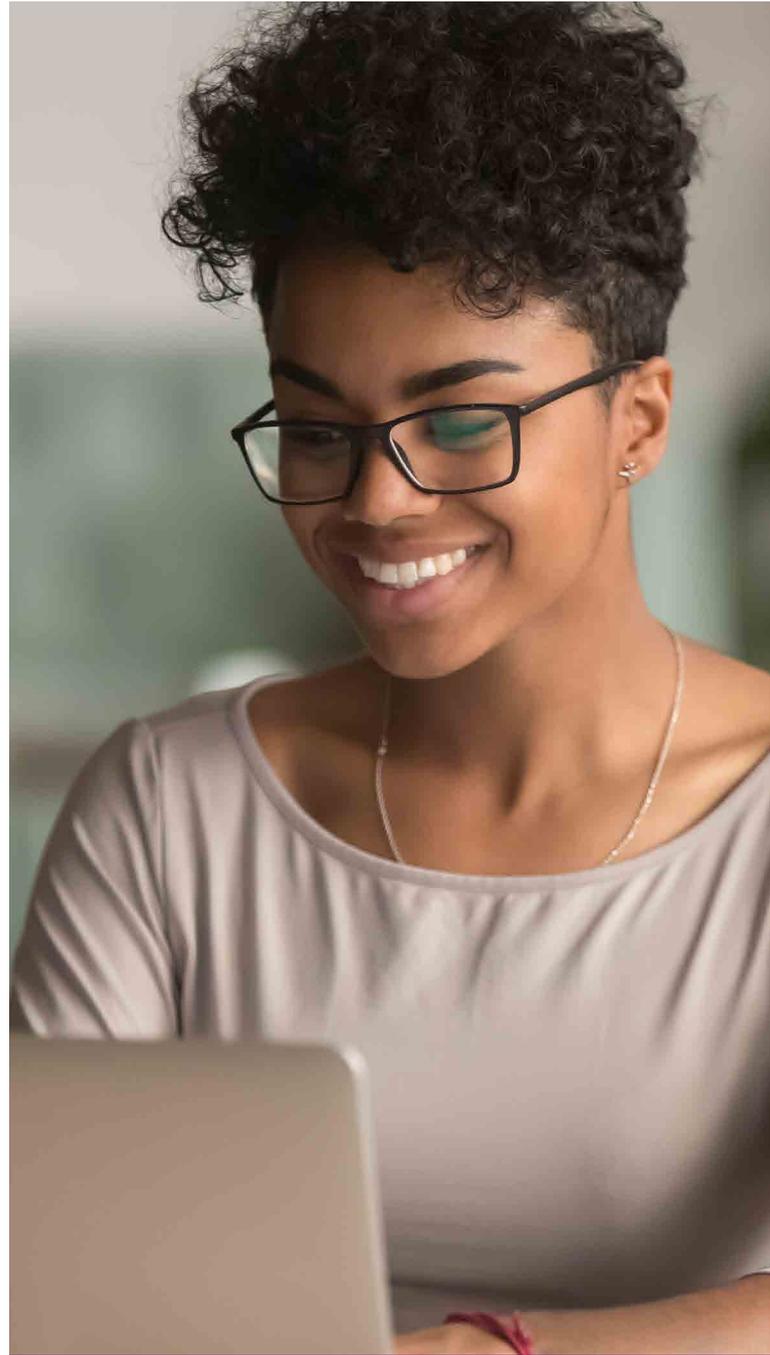
# Executive Summary – Promoting a culture of resilience and continuity, and maximising employee recognition, will improve wellbeing and engagement

2020 has been a year without parallel. Extremely testing market conditions, redundancies, furlough schemes and enforced periods of remote working have combined to put employee wellbeing under extraordinary pressure.

Since employee wellbeing and engagement are closely linked, organisations are well aware of the importance of safeguarding their workforce's mental health. Wellbeing and engagement are not only highly reciprocal, they have profound implications for employee productivity and performance.

Achievers recently conducted surveys of employees and managers in the UK, Ireland, Germany and the Netherlands to gauge levels of employee wellbeing in each country, and to determine how well respondents felt their employers had dealt with the year's events. This Employee Wellbeing in the 'New Normal' report summarises and examines the results of these surveys.

Organisations in the UK and Ireland will be pleased to discover that more than four-fifths (83 per cent) of their employees feel that they've handled the year's unprecedented events well. In addition, 63 per cent of UK and 62 per cent of Irish employees believe that their organisations care about their mental health.



However, the flip side of those statistics is that more than a third of employees in the UK and Ireland are unconvinced that their employer is concerned for their mental wellbeing. Employers will also be concerned that employee engagement levels have suffered a marked decline since Achievers' previous research nine months ago. Only 28 per cent of UK employees described themselves as more engaged this year, with 37 per cent saying they were less engaged and 33 per cent reporting no change. The results in Ireland were slightly more



encouraging, where 36 per cent said that they felt more engaged, while 30 per cent were less engaged and 32 per cent remained static.

## How to improve wellbeing, resilience and culture?

Although employees have largely approved of their organisations' handling of the events of 2020, employers need to wake up to the fact that they've been unable to provide their workforce with enough support to enable it to cope with the mental health demands caused by the pandemic.

Managers may be pleased that 50 per cent of UK and 56 per cent of Irish employees say their work has been more recognised since lockdown began,

*More than a third of UK and Irish employees don't believe their employer cares about their mental wellbeing.*

but that leaves close to half of the workforce who feel either no more or actually less appreciated than before COVID-19 took hold.

If they are to adequately prepare their employees for the testing times to come, employers will need to make improved efforts to promote a culture of resilience and continuity within their organisations.

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# Wellbeing in 2020 – How have managers and employees coped?

- **83 per cent** of employees in both the UK and Ireland approve of their company's handling of this year's events.
- **Managers and employees** in the UK more aligned than in Ireland.
- Employees' view of their firm's concern for **mental wellbeing** not as positive as their managers'.

The good news for organisations in the UK and Ireland is that their staff feel they've done a good job of managing this year's events. In fact, 83 per cent of employees in both the UK and Ireland think their company has handled this year well or very well. The figure was the same for UK managers, but dropped to 79 per cent for their Irish counterparts.

Employers in the UK and Ireland will be encouraged by these findings, particularly when they learn that they were ahead of Germany's, where the equivalent figure was 80 per cent for employees and 82 per cent for managers. Having said that, the UK and Irish result was some way behind that of the Netherlands, where 91 per cent of both employees and managers approved of their company's handling of the events of 2020.

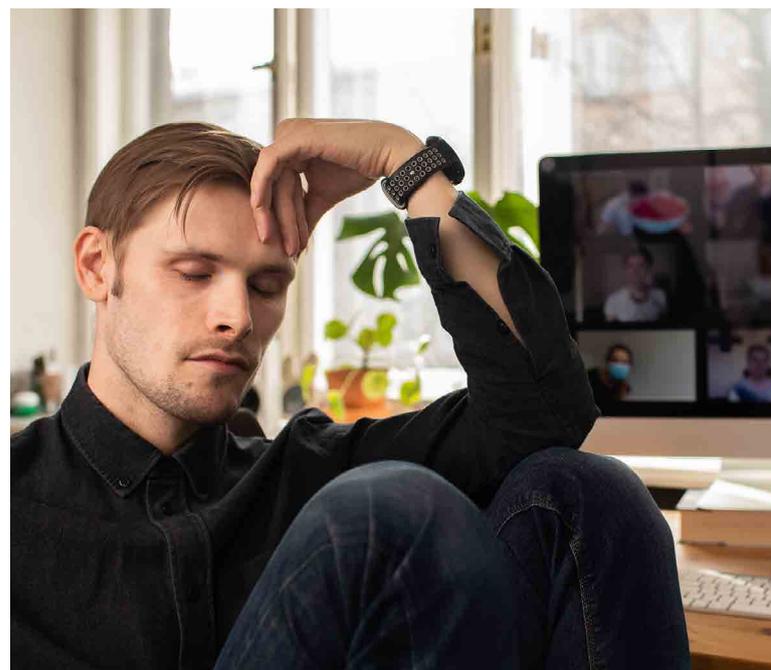
British and Irish organisations can also be pleased that the majority of their employees believe they've been offered adequate support to enable them to cope with the many difficulties that have arisen over the course of the year. Sixty-one per cent of employees on both sides of the Irish Sea were happy with the flexibility shown by their employer during 2020, which compares favourably with the 58 per cent found in Germany but is not quite as positive as the 68 per cent discovered in the Netherlands.

## How seriously are organisations taking wellbeing?

The survey revealed a gap between how employees and managers view efforts to look after workers' wellbeing. In the UK, 62 per cent of employees thought their company takes their mental wellbeing seriously versus 22 per cent who believed they don't. For Irish employees, the figures were 63 per cent and 19 per cent respectively.

In contrast, management felt that it had been offering a greater level of support to its workforce. Almost three-quarters (70 per cent) of UK managers felt their company had given employees sufficient leeway to manage the difficulties presented by this year, with just 23 per cent disagreeing. In Ireland, the split was 71 per cent in favour of the firm's actions, compared with 21 per cent who felt more could have been done.

**The results suggest that, despite their employees' approval of how their managers have handled this year's events, organisations should guard against complacency. Their workforce has sent them a clear message that they aren't as impressed with their company's mental health support as their managers, and firms should focus on narrowing this perception gap.**



# COVID-19's effect on culture, motivation and recognition

- In the UK and Ireland, **71 per cent** of employees believe that their company is more connected than before the pandemic.
- **50 per cent** of Irish and 46 per cent of British employees confess that they're worried about returning to work.
- Only **50 per cent** of UK and 56 per cent of Irish employees feel that they're being recognised more than they were pre-lockdown.



Managers will be hugely relieved by these findings, as the vast majority of their staff think that their company has become more connected and collaborative since the pandemic began. Almost three-quarters of employees in the UK and Ireland feel that the crisis has served to strengthen their internal connections (71 per cent in both countries) and fostered greater collaboration (72 per cent in the UK, 71 per cent in Ireland).

These findings are even more encouraging when compared to those in the other countries we surveyed. In Germany, 67 per cent of employees said they felt closer to their peers and 62 per cent reported greater collaboration, while the results in the Netherlands were more uneven (68 and 54 per cent respectively).

A concerning, if not surprising, finding of our research is that a large proportion of the workforce in the UK and Ireland is nervous or even scared about physically returning to their place of work. Half (50 per cent) of Irish and 46 per cent of British employees confessed that they're worried about going back to work. These findings are in line with the result in the Netherlands (44 per cent), but a significant amount higher than in Germany, where only 29 per cent of employees expressed anxiety about returning to the office.

Lack of recognition leading to reduced motivation? Managers on both sides of the Irish Sea should be concerned that their employees don't feel they've been appreciated to the same degree as their management believes they have. While employees have undoubtedly struggled from pressures related to the pandemic, just 50 per cent of UK and 56 per cent of Irish employees report feeling more recognised than they did pre-pandemic, but those figures jumped to 66 per cent and 67 per cent respectively when managers were asked if their teams were receiving greater recognition due to the pressure of lockdown.

Leaders may well have been going out of their way to show their appreciation to their team members, but these findings imply that those efforts have been met with a lukewarm response. Management may need to consider alternative ways of demonstrating their gratitude.

**Despite the huge pressures imposed by COVID-19 on working conditions, this research has shown that a large proportion of both the UK and Irish workforce believe that their organisational culture has actually thrived in response. However, employers will need to manage their employees' eventual return to work carefully and ensure that they use employee recognition in ways that align managers and employees as closely as possible.**



# The increasing importance of diversity and inclusion

- **76 per cent** of employees in the UK and 75 per cent in Ireland feel their company prioritises diversity and inclusion.

- **Four-fifths (80 per cent)** of British and 79 per cent of Irish employees believe their organisation values the opinions of its entire workforce.

- Discussions of diversity and inclusion have been encouraged in **62 per cent** of the firms surveyed in Ireland and **59 per cent** of those in the UK.

Aside from the global impact of COVID-19, 2020 will be remembered as the year when issues of race and equality took a prominent hold of the collective consciousness. Unsurprisingly, organisations in the UK and Ireland have been making deliberate and visible efforts to highlight diversity and inclusion (D&I), and these initiatives haven't gone unnoticed internally.

Among employees, 76 per cent in the UK and 75 per cent in Ireland believe that their company

prioritises D&I. Managers will be pleased that the three-quarters of their workforce who approve of their organisation's D&I initiatives is appreciably more than the 65 per cent found in Germany, although they've still got work to do if they're to achieve the 87 per cent approval rating given by employees in the Netherlands.

Employers in 62 per cent of the Irish and 59 per cent of the British firms surveyed have also encouraged employees to discuss D&I in the workplace. These initiatives have helped to convince four-fifths of both workforces (80 per cent in the UK and 79 per cent in Ireland) that their company values the viewpoints of all of its employees.

These findings are a good distance ahead of those in Germany, where 65 per cent of employees feel their organisation takes D&I seriously, but some way behind the Netherlands, where 87 per cent of employees endorse their employer's approach to the issue.

**This section of the survey reveals that the vast majority of organisations in both the UK and Ireland have taken steps to prioritise diversity and inclusion and have convinced their employees that they take the issue seriously.**

## Engagement

After such a momentous, tumultuous year, one in which almost every facet of our working lives has been subject to reappraisal, the single question that offers a litmus test of current employee sentiment



has yet to be asked: are employees more or less engaged now than they were last year?

For senior management teams, the answers make for grim reading. Just 28 per cent of UK employees claimed they felt more engaged this year compared to last, while 37 per cent said they felt less engaged and 33 per cent reported no change. In Ireland, the results were more positive, albeit nothing to shout about: the proportion feeling more engaged was 36 per cent, with 30 per cent saying they felt less engaged and 32 per cent remaining as they were.

These results are even more worrying for British and Irish employers when put in a European context. In the Netherlands, 39 per cent of employees claimed they felt more engaged this year compared to last. They were closely followed by the Irish (36 per cent) and the Germans (35 per cent), with the British trailing some way behind (28 per cent).

## Key lessons and conclusion

Business leaders and HR directors will be encouraged by many of the findings in this report. Overall, employees in both the UK and Ireland

think their leaders have coped well with the myriad challenges thrown their way during the course of the year.

Workforces on both sides of the Irish Sea believe that their organisation takes their mental health and wellbeing seriously and are convinced that their company culture has improved as a result of the numerous initiatives implemented by senior managers. Employees are also grateful for the support that has allowed them to work remotely during the pandemic, as well as the fact that their firms have taken steps to prioritise diversity and inclusion.

Despite many of the encouraging results of this research, managers will be concerned by the number of employees for whom engagement has deteriorated or remained flat. To address the employee engagement crisis, organisations should focus on the following key areas:

- **Implement initiatives to ensure employees are regularly recognised and feel valued.**
- **Strive to embed a culture of resilience throughout the company.**
- **Ensure that employees understand and appreciate their firm's mental health support to the same extent as their managers.**
- **Continue to prioritise initiatives that promote diversity and inclusion at all levels.**

If organisations in the UK and Ireland are to weather the pandemic's fallout, they'll need to concentrate on keeping their managers and employees aligned and motivated. To make sure that company culture is a unifying and motivating force, firms will have to remain fixated on engagement by encouraging connection, belonging and appreciation at all levels.

## Methodology

Conducted using Pollfish between 26 August and 2 October 2020, Achievers' online survey received 3,600 responses (1,200 in the UK, 600 in Ireland, 1,200 in Germany and 600 in the Netherlands). Respondents were screened to ensure they were in employment.



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