

A group of people are working at a dark wooden table in a modern office. Several laptops are open on the table, displaying various data visualizations and documents. A man in a brown hoodie is looking at a laptop, while another man in a blue shirt is looking at a laptop. A man in a dark blue shirt is seen from the back, wearing headphones. A small potted plant sits on the table. A chandelier with several glass shades hangs above the table. A water bottle is on the table. The background shows a wooden wall and a window.

Great  
Place  
To  
Work.

# Stress and Wellbeing at Work: A European Outlook

Great Place to Work's study on building a  
culture of trust, health and wellbeing



# About Us

Great Place to Work® is a global people analytics and consulting firm that helps companies of all sizes produce better business results. Our focus is on the working experience for every employee – our research shows that there's a clear direct relationship between trust, employee experience and financial performance. Over the past 30 years, we have captured the views of more than 100 million employees globally, helping organisations around the world identify and build high-trust, high-performance cultures.

In Europe, we have generated data for 20 years across 20 countries, on millions of employees, to help companies create a meaningful impact on their business, their people, and their culture.

Through our recognition and certification programmes, we celebrate outstanding workplaces in our annual Europe's Best Workplaces™ list, as well as a variety of other rankings across European countries and in over 60 other nations. Our mission drives everything we do: to build a better world by helping every organisation become a Great Place to Work® For All.





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# Introduction

## Stress and Wellbeing Across Europe

Work-related stress is unfortunately commonplace in today's world and has significant detrimental impacts for both individuals and organisations. Most of us have experienced a stressor – be this work, relationships, money or health – and its sour impact on life. Stress in the workplace, whether job-related or not, is directly correlated with absenteeism, turnover, financial waste as well as poor customer service. As such, workplace interventions that mitigate stress are paramount for productivity and retention.

Our research reveals the key role of prevention in safeguarding employees against chronic stress and creating a work environment conducive for thriving. Organisations should hence focus on preventative approaches: building a culture of trust and introducing people practices around health and wellbeing (explained in more depth over the following pages). Organisations actively protecting employees against chronic work stress via stress monitoring, as well as mechanisms of prevention and support, benefit from positive outcomes such as higher productivity and retention, less absenteeism and presenteeism, as well as boosted morale.

In Europe, 52% of the companies surveyed had devised support measures for executives experiencing stress, albeit only 26% reported mechanisms in place to measure stress levels. In researching causes of workplace stress, the two most prominent work-related stress triggers were **pressure to deliver** and **long hours** of work. Interventions must therefore consider resourcing and fair workload distribution.

Over 900 European organisations were asked by Great Place to Work® to share their executives' views on stress issues and wellbeing practices. The results reveal that 47% consider stress a key issue in the organisation, while 65% of executives said health and wellbeing emerged as a strategic priority. The highest levels of stress were found in Switzerland (72%), Austria (68%), Greece (58%) and Germany (58%); the countries prioritising health and wellbeing the most were France (84%), Sweden (82%) and the Netherlands (72%). In a broader view, for the 2020 European strategy, health and wellbeing emerged as a leading factor for growth, competitiveness and sustainable development. Greater engagement and efforts around the subject by both government and the private sector can bring wellbeing to everyone's reach.

People's perceptions about how psychosocial risks are managed at work are hardly encouraging: Eurofound reports that **'a significant proportion of workers ... are confronted with a very high level of work demands'** and that intensive work is **'quite prevalent'** – 36% of workers in the EU work 'all the time' or 'almost all the time' to tight deadlines. The report notes that highly intensive work has negative consequences for mental and physical health as well as absenteeism, but also points out that it can be associated with better company performance and higher rewards for workers.

Source CIPD (2016)



## The Research

Work-Related Stress:  
European Data

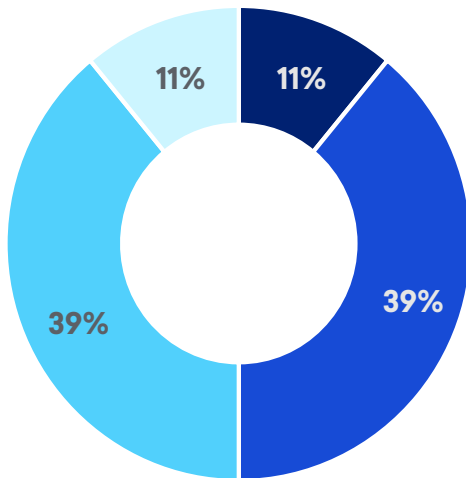


# The Methodology and Sample

Great Place to Work® asked respondents from over 900 organisations across 13 European countries and multiple industries about their current wellbeing practices and stress reduction plans. Our sample included respondents from Austria, Denmark, France, Greece, Germany, Italy, Norway, Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey and the UK.

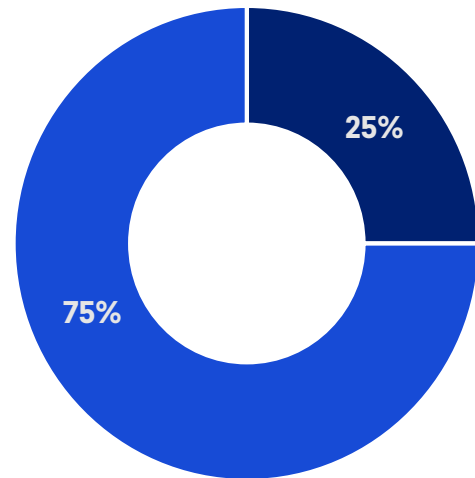
## Breakdown of respondents

### Current Job Position



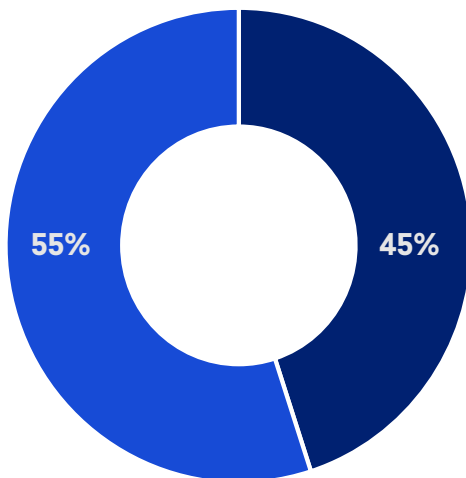
- HR Specialist
- HR Director
- HR Manager
- Other Profession (not HR)

### Member of Top Management Team



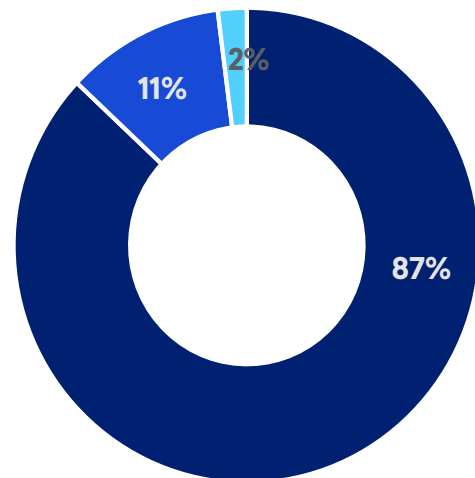
- Yes
- No

### Organisation Type



- Domestic %
- Multinational %

### Company Type



- Private
- Public
- Semi-State



# Wellbeing Across Europe: Key Findings

HR professionals were asked whether health and wellbeing emerged as a strategic priority for their organisation.



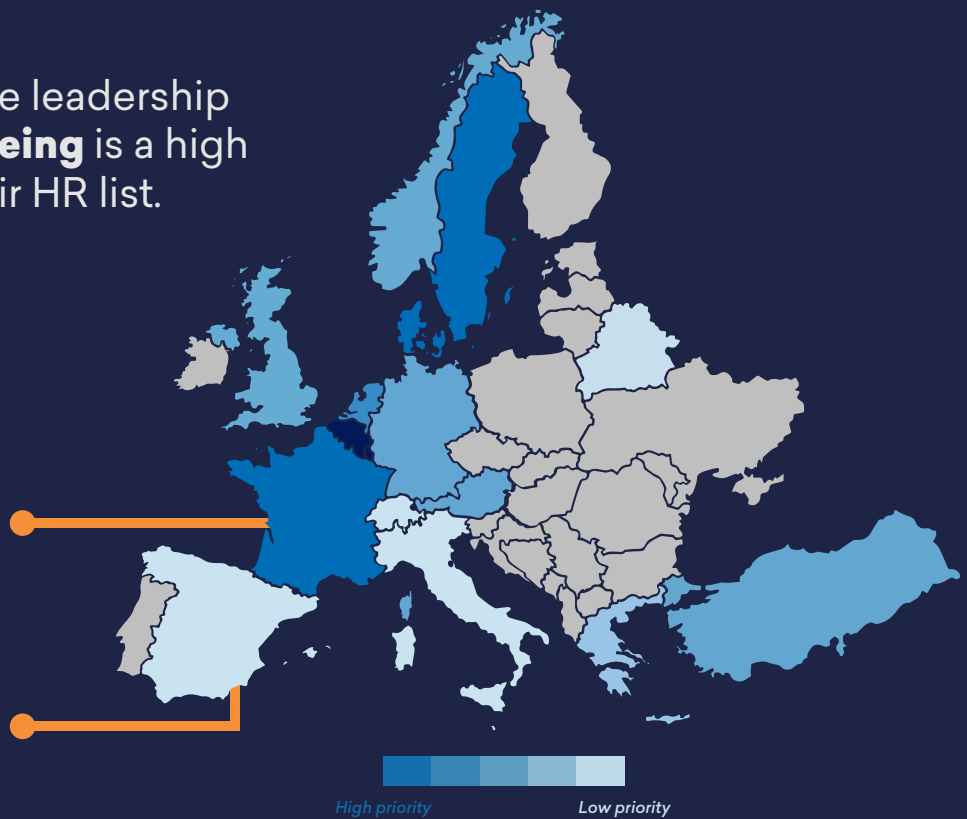
Overall, **65%** of the leadership agreed that **well-being** is a high priority on their HR list.

## France

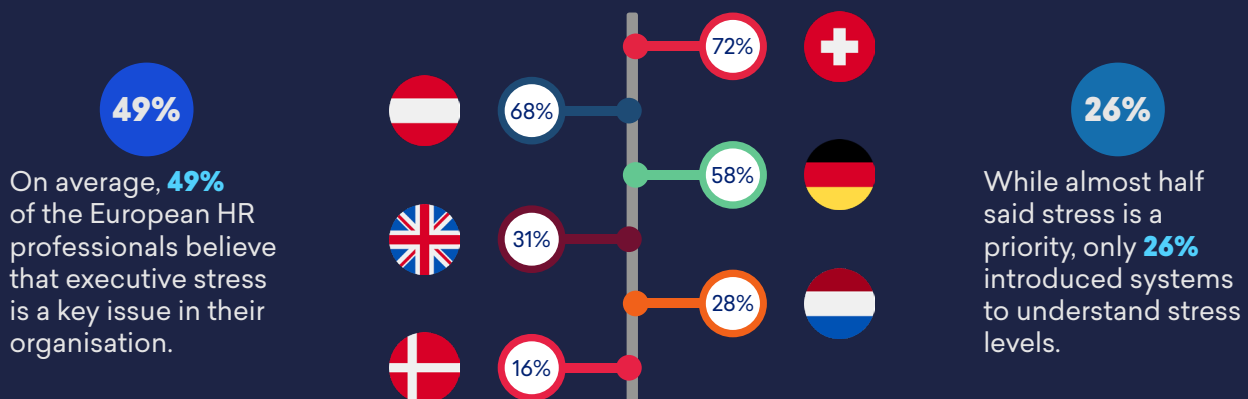
For **84%** of the French HR leaders, wellbeing is a top issue to focus on.

## Spain

**47%** of Spanish businesses are prioritising wellbeing strategies.



Wellbeing practices is a mechanism companies rely on to reduce work-related stress levels.

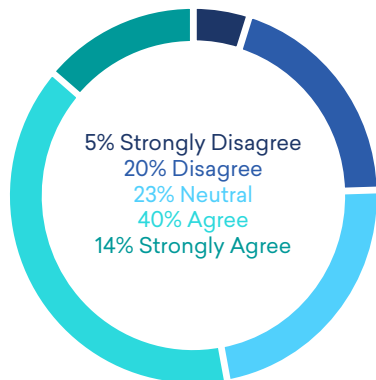


There are variations in European central countries: Switzerland, Austria and Germany are showing the highest figures and the UK, Netherlands and Denmark the lowest.





# Triggers of Work-Related Stress for European Executives

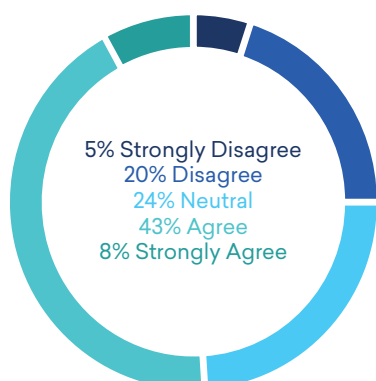
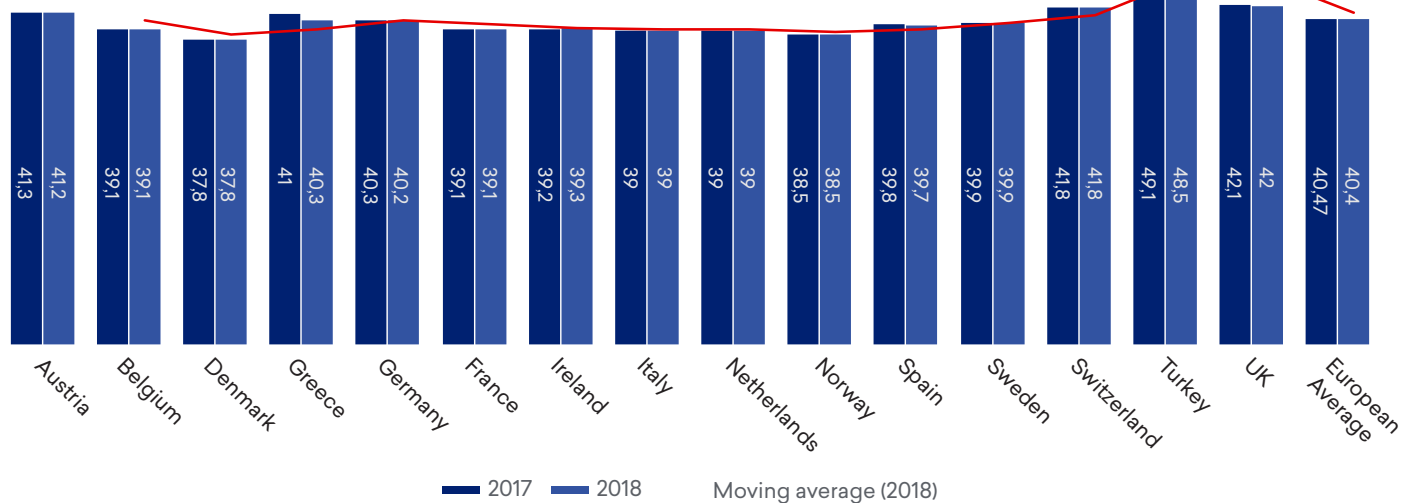


## Longer hours

**54%** of executives typically work over and above their contracted working hours. The culture of long working hours is more common in large and super-large organisations than SMEs.

Working significantly longer hours is a constant practice at executive level. Considering the 13 countries in this survey, their performance in Eurostat's annual study of working hours in Europe suggests that traditional working hours are consistent. For the last two years in Europe, the average continues to be 40.4 weekly working hours, with Turkey leading this list at 48.5 hours, and Denmark on the other end of the spectrum at only 37.8 hours.

## Weekly hours of work in Europe



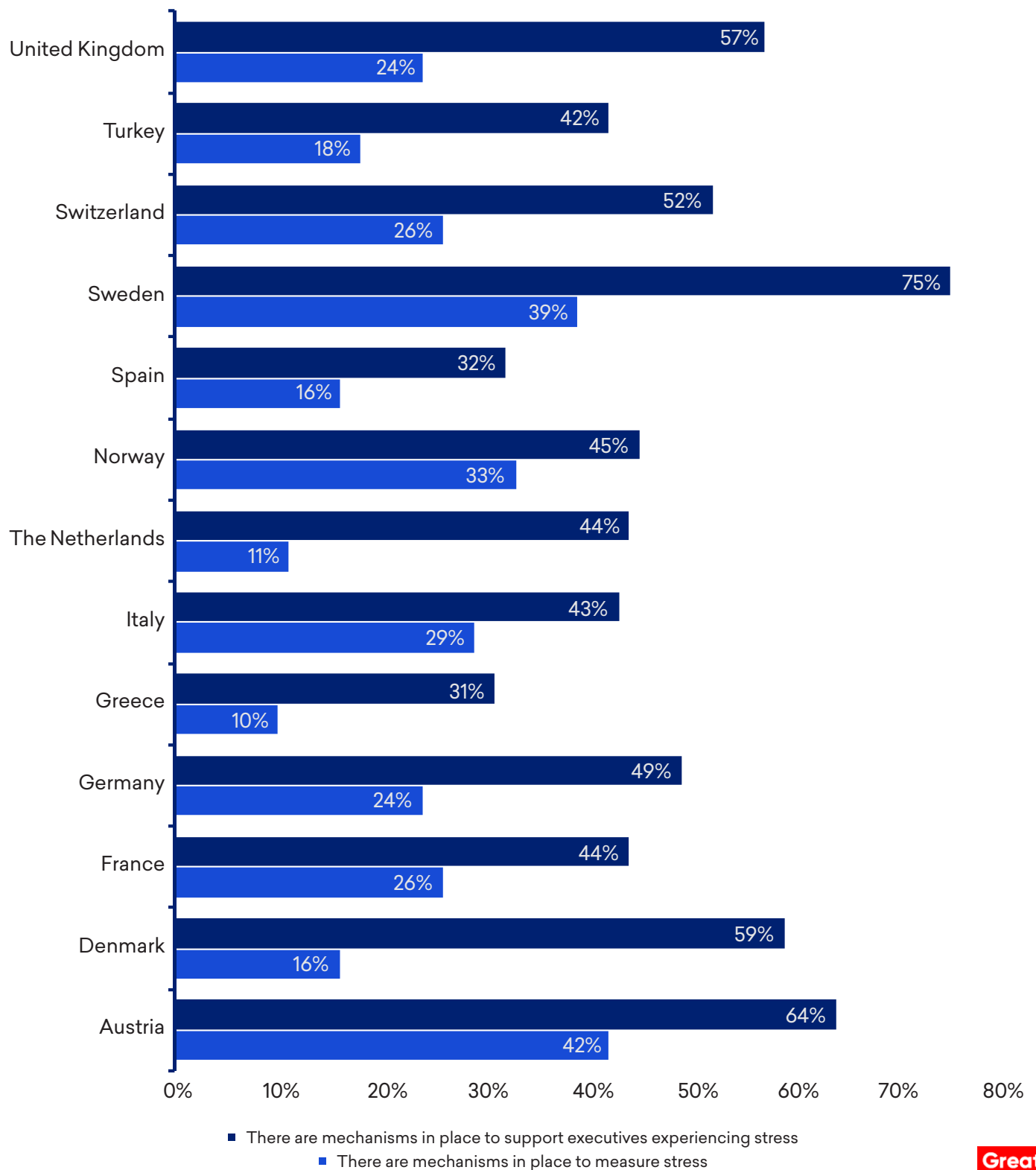
## Pressure to deliver

Over half of the HR leaders surveyed (**51%**) agreed that excessive pressure affects senior managers' mental health. Executive stress derived from expectations around deliverables or targets is particularly prevalent in the health care sector (**64%**), industrial services (**63%**) and manufacturing (**59%**).



# Stress Monitoring and Availability of Support Across Europe

On average, **52%** of European HR professionals reported their organisations to have *mechanisms in place to support* the executives experiencing stress, but **only 24%** reported mechanisms to *measure* stress levels in the first place.

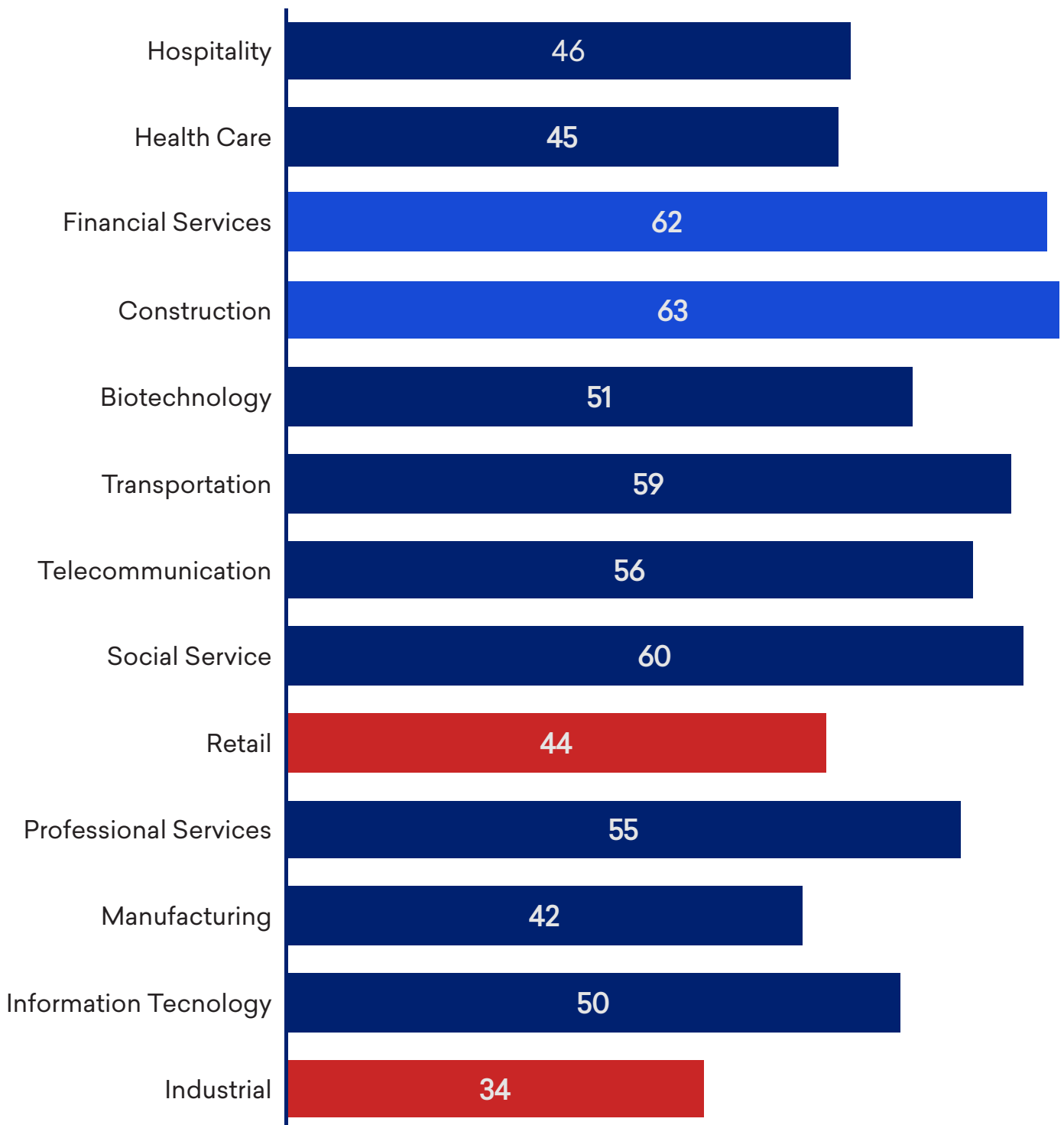




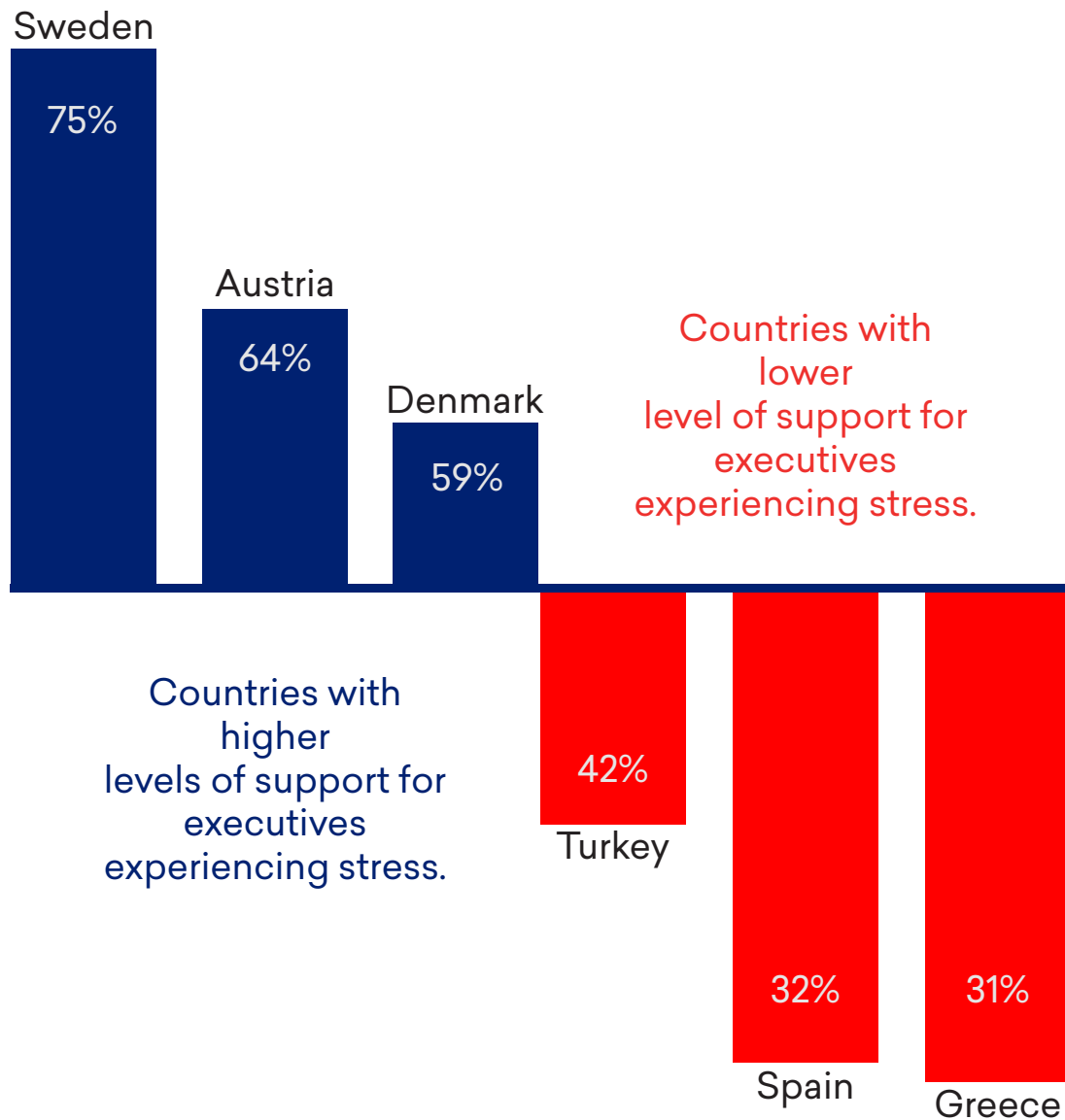
# Stress Monitoring and Availability of Support Across Europe

Available support for executives struggling to cope with stress is more commonly found in sectors like construction, infrastructure and real estate (63%) as well as financial services (62%).

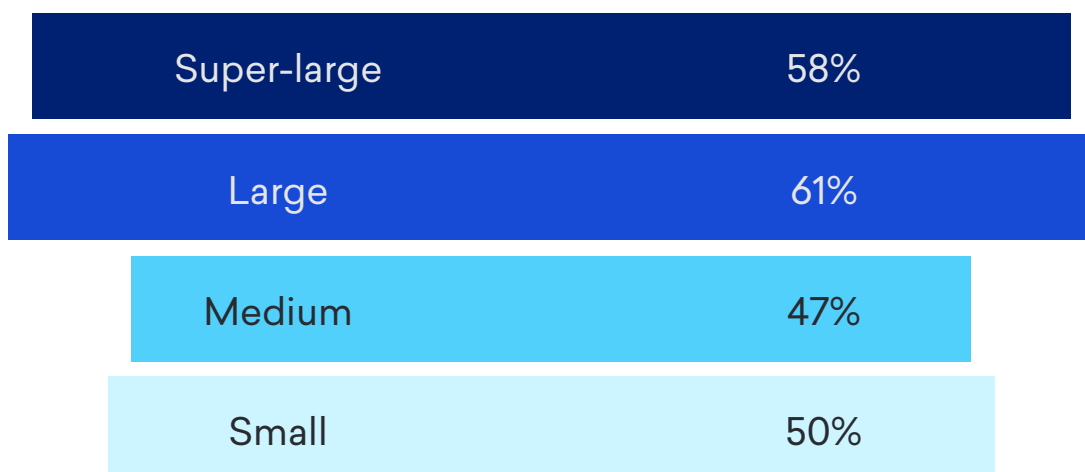
## Industry



# Stress Monitoring and Availability of Support Across Europe



Leaders of different sized companies that said they **agree** that working longer hours is a constant practice at the executive level.





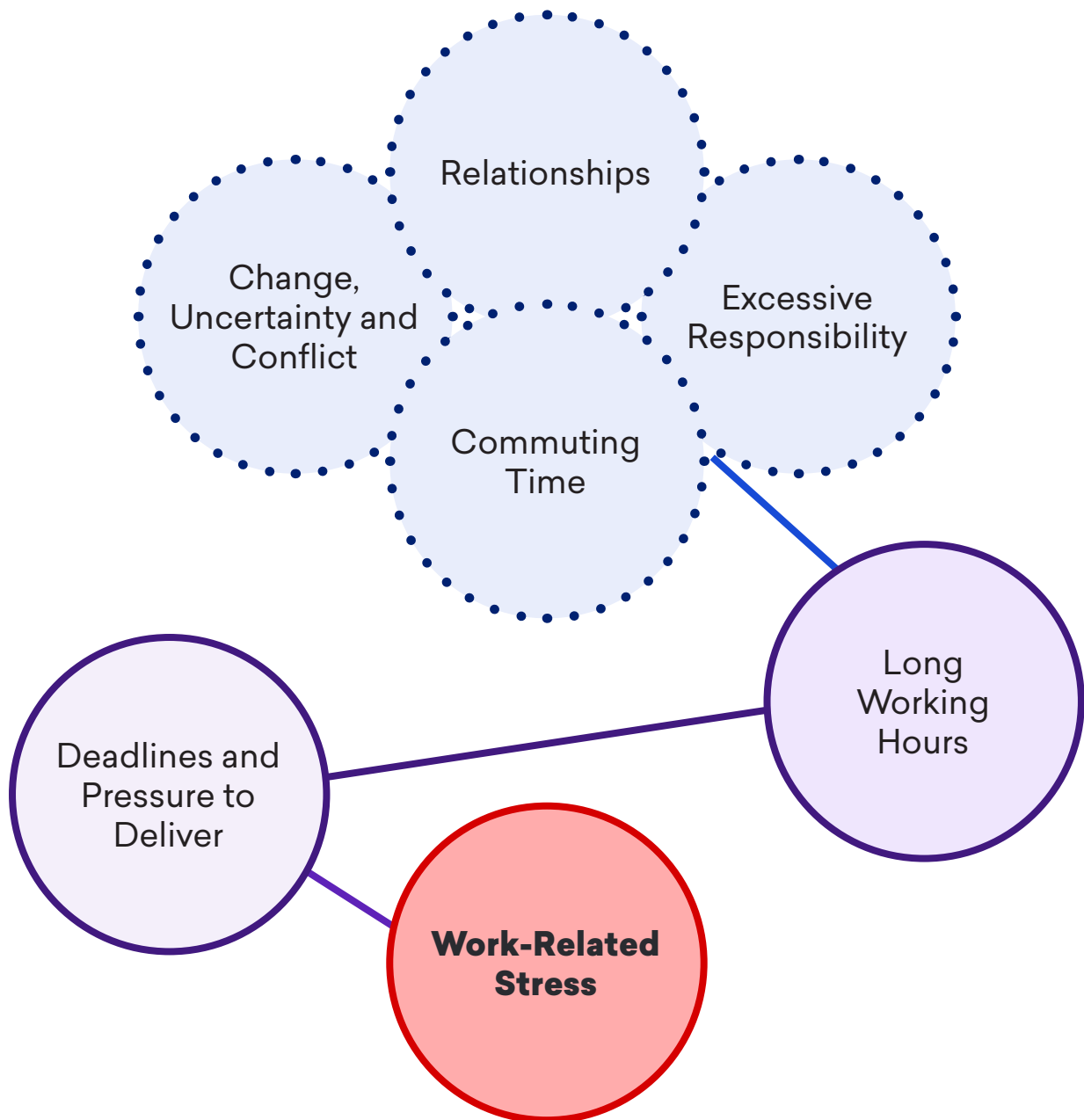
Great  
Place  
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Work.



Integrating Wellbeing  
into the Workplace

# Drivers of Work Stress Related

Nowadays, stress is a frequently referenced umbrella term. But at its core, basic meaning – what is stress, and how is it triggered? By nature, the human body responds involuntarily in physiological and psychological ways to deadlines, health concerns, family conflicts, money worries, performance and achievement pressures among others – referred to as stressors.



## What causes stress in the workplace?

Quick et al. 2016 divided the causes of work-related stress into the four most relevant categories:

1. Task Demand: workload/job insecurity
2. Role Demand: role conflict
3. Physical Demand: temperature, lighting, workplace design
4. Interpersonal Demand: personality conflicts, leadership style

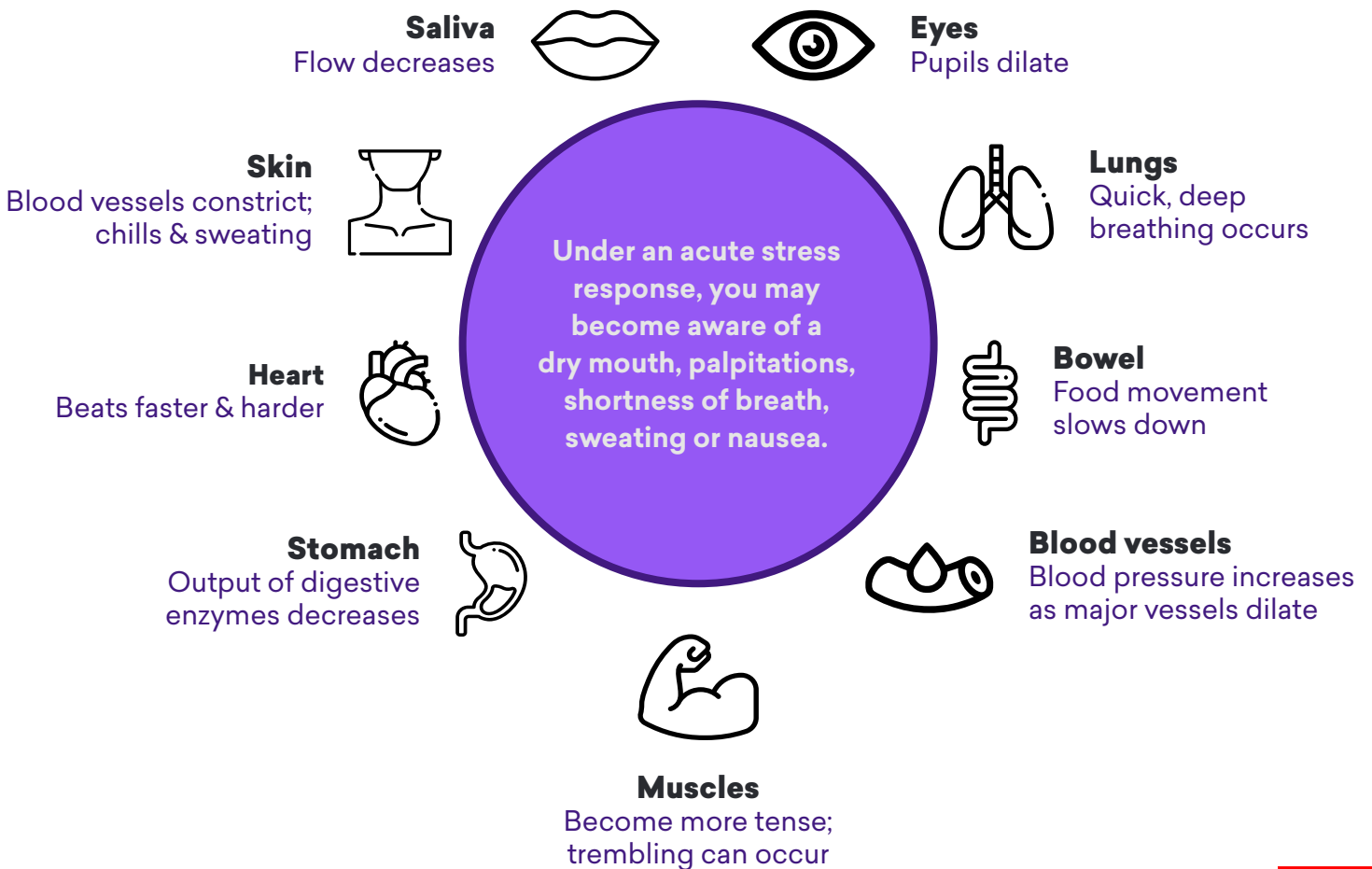
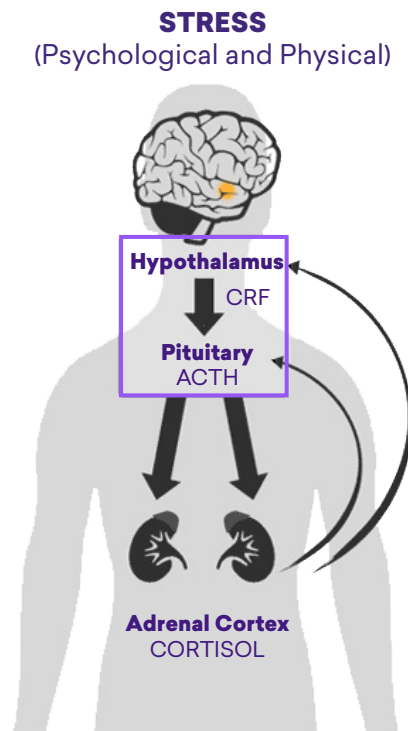


# Understanding the Stress Mechanism

The physiological stress response is orchestrated by the autonomic nervous system and HPA axis, causing quickened heart rate, increased blood flow to the brain and skeletal muscles, as well as heightened blood glucose levels, alongside the release of cortisol and adrenaline.

The fight-or-flight response is an adaptive evolutionary process preparing the body for immediate danger – which is typically misplaced in the modern workplace.

With chronic stress, the long-term over-activation of this response can directly lead to diabetes, coronary heart disease and mental illness.



# The Value of Wellbeing-Based Interventions

Excessive worry around a simple unmet deadline can lead to an acute anxiety response – even a full-blown disorder if such concerns become habitual. As work-related worries are not unusual in Western countries, we must recognise the importance of intervention measures to manage stress and promote wellbeing to prevent burnout and other significant health detriments.

Evidence-based practice now recognises that work-related stress is something to be managed, rather than eliminated or prevented entirely. Van Der Klink et al. (2001) provide support for the effectiveness of different types of stress-tackling measures. These predominantly include cognitive behavioural approaches (which focus on adapting cognitive skills and behavioural patterns to better cope with stress) as well as relaxation techniques (meditation, mindfulness and breathing exercises). Quick and Henderson (2016) argue that occupational stress should be a public health issue, which demands a public health response emphasising health protection and preventive stress management. The goal is not to eliminate stress – as some levels of eustress can be beneficial – but rather to enhance wellbeing and resilience, making it possible to be efficient, healthy and thrive, even under pressure.

Dealing with work-related stress is critical to employee health, business finance, team engagement and delivery of high-level customer service. Results from an Osha study (2014) around health care across Europe displays the financial costs per country:

Country	Total health care costs for CVD	Cost per capita	Percentage of total health expenditure
Austria	2 338 617	280	8%
Belgium	2 374 817	221	6%
Bulgaria	347 877	46	13%
Cyprus	66 750	84	7%
Czech Republic	1 567 633	84	14%
Denmark	1 244 403	226	5%
Estonia	166 457	124	17%
Finland	1 958 752	368	12%
France	12 731 261	198	6%
Germany	30 679 159	374	11%
Greece	2 799 545	249	11%
Hungary	998 760	100	14%
Ireland	925 547	208	6%
Italy	14 488 331	241	10%
Latvia	203 355	90	17%
Lithuania	250 913	75	12%
Luxembourg	133 045	270	4%
Malta	48 511	117	11%
Netherlands	5 797 817	352	8%
Poland	4 157 650	109	17%
Portugal	1 215 392	114	6%
Romania	802 565	37	12%
Slovakia	594 854	110	10%
Slovenia	263 352	130	8%
Spain	7 935 489	173	8%
Sweden	2 430 301	263	8%
United Kingdom	9 635 790	156	8%
<b>Total EU</b>	<b>106 56 940</b>	<b>212</b>	<b>9%</b>

EU-OSHA (2014) reports that the total cost of mental ill health in Europe is €240 billion/per year.

Of this, €136 billion is the cost of reduced productivity including sickness absence, and €104 billion is direct costs such as medical treatment.

Productivity loss from presenteeism may in fact cost twice that of absenteeism – warning against a culture of workaholism and long hours.

Table 3: Health care costs for CVD in the EU countries (in € thousands).

Calculating the costs of work-related stress and psychosocial risks – a literature review.



# What Drives Workplace Wellbeing?

## Insights from Great Place to Work® UK

Fuelled by the growing salience of wellbeing issues amongst the UK's labour market, Great Place to Work® UK developed a Wellbeing Model to conceptualise and measure workplace wellbeing in a holistic manner.

The model breaks the concept down into six key dimensions, that are distinct in themselves albeit strongly interconnected. Dimensions like Work Environment, near the bottom of the model, are more foundational and immediate, while dimensions like Fulfilment, near the top, are more intangible and abstract in nature, but can bring the most value if correctly addressed. The 6 dimensions are measured across 17 statements in a purpose-built Wellbeing Index.

The key takeaway for wellbeing efforts, guided by the cogwheel model, is that it requires a long-term cultural change. A genuine wellbeing culture doesn't happen overnight nor as a tick-box exercise; it must be strategically built and carefully nurtured over time. It is a philosophy, a way of going about things.

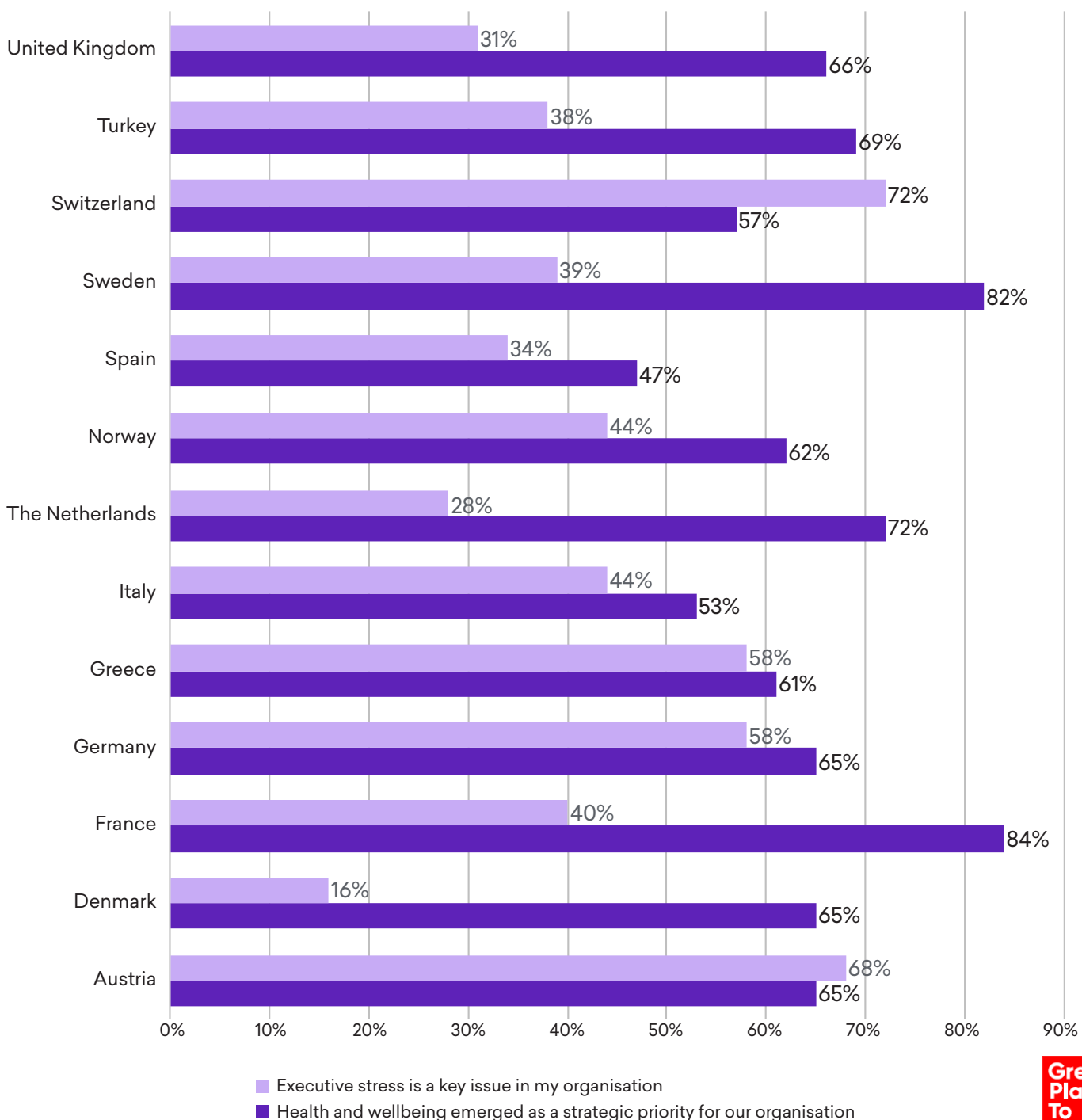


# Is Wellbeing a Priority?

## The European Perspective

We assessed whether executives consider health and wellbeing practices as a priority in fighting stress – in those organisations where this emerged as a key issue. As mentioned previously, countries like France (84%), Sweden (82%) and the Netherlands (72%) assigned a significant degree of importance to health and wellbeing – even when under 50% considered stress to be a key issue in the organisation. **The Wellbeing Priority vs Stress Is a Key Issue** graphic illustrates the outlook of European countries around internal stress concerns versus prioritising wellbeing techniques to tackle this.

### Wellbeing Priority vs Stress Is a Key Issue





# Managing Stress by Enhancing Wellbeing

To avoid work stress becoming distress, it must be addressed head-on by organisations, leaders and employees themselves. Prolonged chronic stress can manifest as a range of issues and health detriments including anxiety, social withdrawal, impaired immune response, heart disease, and in the worst cases, burnout.

The personal impacts of a stressful situation – unavoidable at times in most workplaces – are determined by the way individuals respond to them. Viewing such situations as challenges that offer opportunities for growth, rather than hindrances or threats, empowers you to control and benefit from the situation.

Considering this, emotional intelligence and mental resilience are likely to be two of the essential workplace skills of the century. Mastery of deep relaxation and mindfulness techniques will also be significant assets for personal resilience, in an ever-stressful and turbulent working world. At all work levels in the company, there are a few points of attention to prevent stressful circumstances at work:

## As an Employee

Don't underestimate the importance of **little things**:

- Proper **breaks**, including lunch away from your desk
- Never too busy to skip a **meal**
- Stay **hydrated**
- Get up and **move** once in a while or do some stretches at desk

Design a daily and weekly routine that **balances** enough sleep, exercise and personal time with work

**Interact** face to face with colleagues where possible

Don't hesitate to **share** issues with your line manager and peers

## As a People Manager

Understand the importance of being a supportive line manager, and get to know people on a **personal, meaningful** level

- All one-to-ones should enquire about wellbeing
- Where issues arise, ensure they are being seen professionally
- Be kind and compassionate, thank people for sharing openly

**Role-model** a healthy work-life balance and taking time for personal wellbeing, e.g. incorporate health promotion into day-to-day processes such as walking meetings

Pay careful attention to resourcing and workloads, making sure teams are not stretched too thin – encourage **openness** about this and look out for symptoms of stress

Ensure that **roles, responsibilities, expectations and priorities are clearly defined**. Be prescriptive only about job **outputs** – allow as much control and autonomy as possible

# Organisational Approaches to Health and Wellbeing

We have selected five top trends seen across leading employers, which can contribute to a successful health and wellbeing strategy:

## 1. Wellbeing strategy and responsibility

Senior leadership buy-in is crucial. Executives must set the tone by explicitly making wellbeing a strategic priority, allocating appropriate investment towards this.

## 2. Empowerment and inclusion

Initiatives should encourage everyone to participate, contribute and benefit – not just HR and leadership. Through employee groups and representatives, organisations can ensure wellbeing does not get tackled as a tick-box list of standalone activities, but rather as an integral part of organisational culture.

## 3. Customised programmes

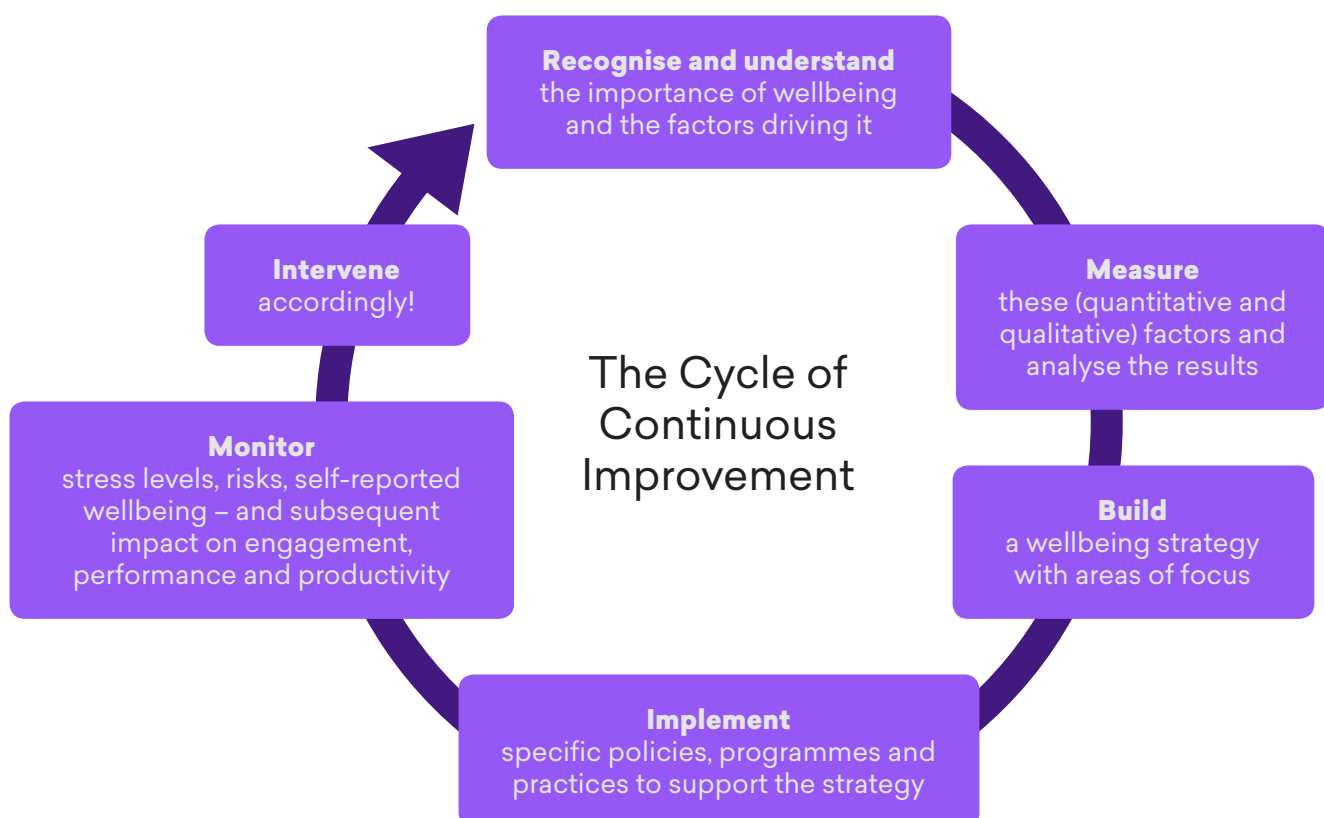
Leading organisations invest in tailored programmes, built on employee feedback around what is valuable and needed. Initiatives need to be well implemented and communicated to maximise buy-in.

## 4. Technology support

Innovative wellbeing programmes may introduce physical and mental health support hubs, wearables such as watches as well as apps encouraging healthier lifestyle habits around nutrition, exercise, relaxation and sleep.

## 5. Measuring impact

Evaluate your wellbeing initiatives regularly in order to keep improving them. Objective metrics include amounts and reasons for sickness absence, voluntary turnover and usage of EAPs and health insurance. Pulse surveys around stress and wellbeing also supply valuable insights.





# Employee Experience: The Way Forward

Employee Perceptions and Best People Practices Across  
Best Workplaces™



**Great  
Place  
To  
Work.**



# Employee Perceptions in Best Workplaces™

Via our Trust Index® survey, we measure and map the conditions needed for employees to experience a great place to work. In our European research, we highlighted employees' perceptions across six key factors that allow companies to improve their employee experience and distinguish themselves as employers that promote wellbeing.

**89%**

Our facilities contribute to a good working environment.

**88%**

Management shows a sincere interest in me as a person, not just an employee.

**84%**

Management involves people in decisions that affect their jobs or work environment.

**88%**

This is a psychologically and emotionally healthy place to work.

**93%**

I am able to take time off from work when I think it's necessary.

**86%**

People are encouraged to balance their work life and their personal life.

Great Place to Work average in all European countries.

**Great  
Place  
To  
Work.**



# Employee Perceptions in Best Workplaces™

To take an average European pulse, we asked unrecognised companies the same questions to show the gap in employee perceptions between best and average workplaces.

Our facilities contribute to a good working environment.

85% Best Workplaces™  
54% National Average

Management shows a sincere interest in me as a person, not just an employee.

83% Best Workplaces™  
48% National Average

Management involves people in decisions that affect their jobs or work environment.

76% Best Workplaces™  
43% National Average

This is a psychologically and emotionally healthy place to work.

82% Best Workplaces™  
49% National Average

I am able to take time off from work when I think it's necessary.

89% Best Workplaces™  
62% National Average

People are encouraged to balance their work life and their personal life.

80% Best Workplaces™  
48% National Average

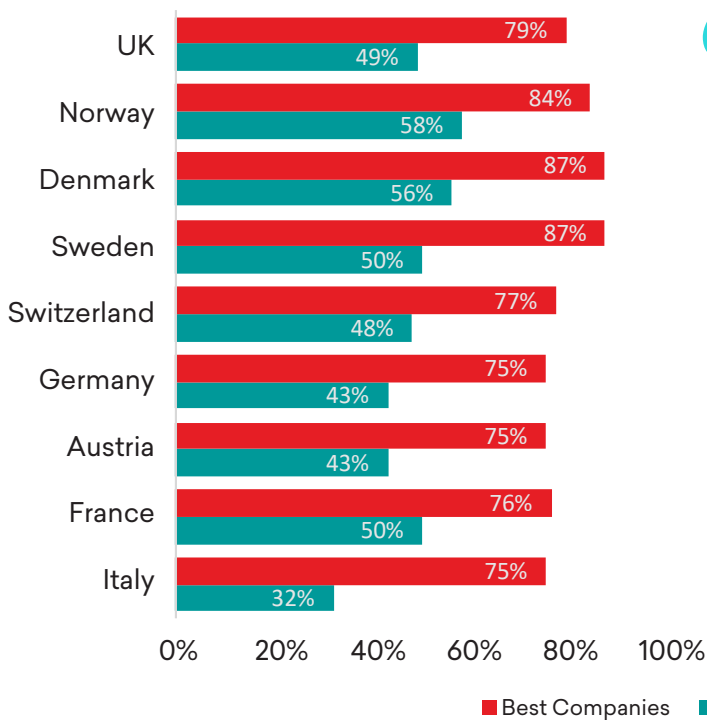
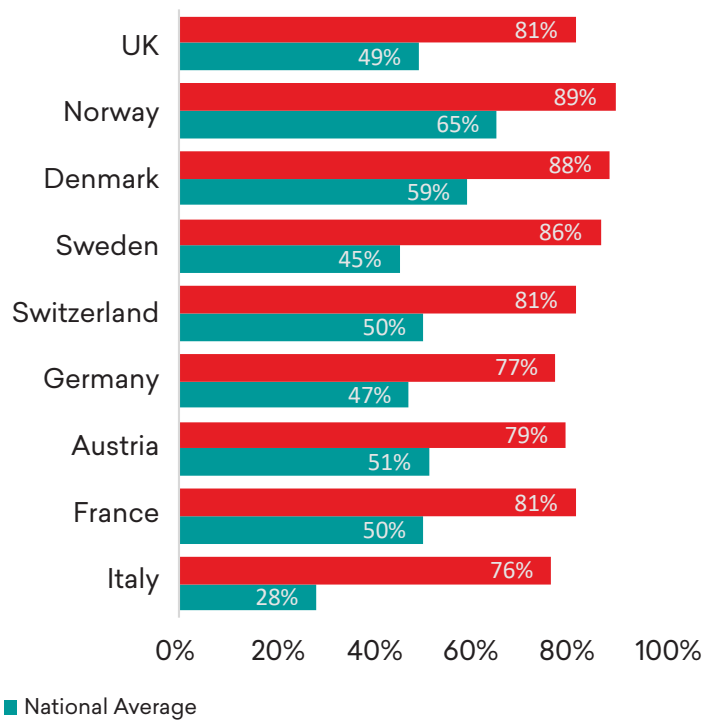
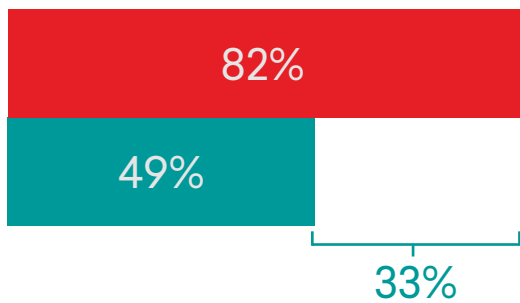
National average study provided to Great Place to Work in 9 European countries.

Great Place To Work.

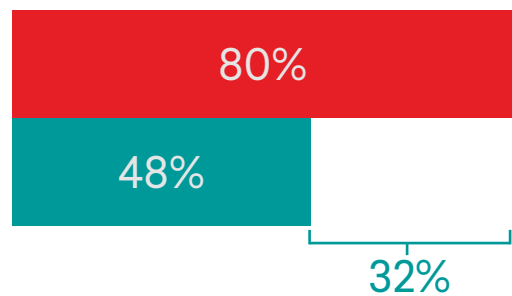


# Employee Perceptions in Best Workplaces™: Country-Level

*This is a psychologically and emotionally healthy place to work*

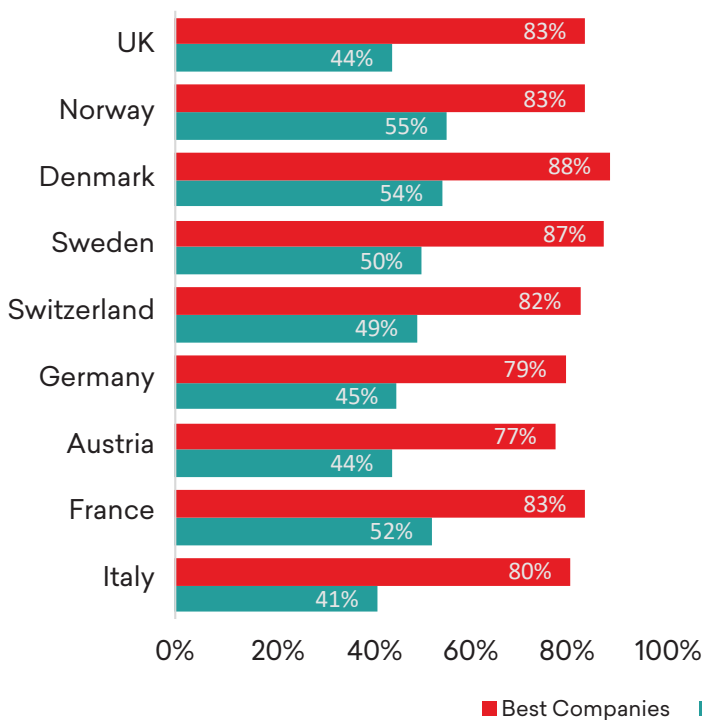
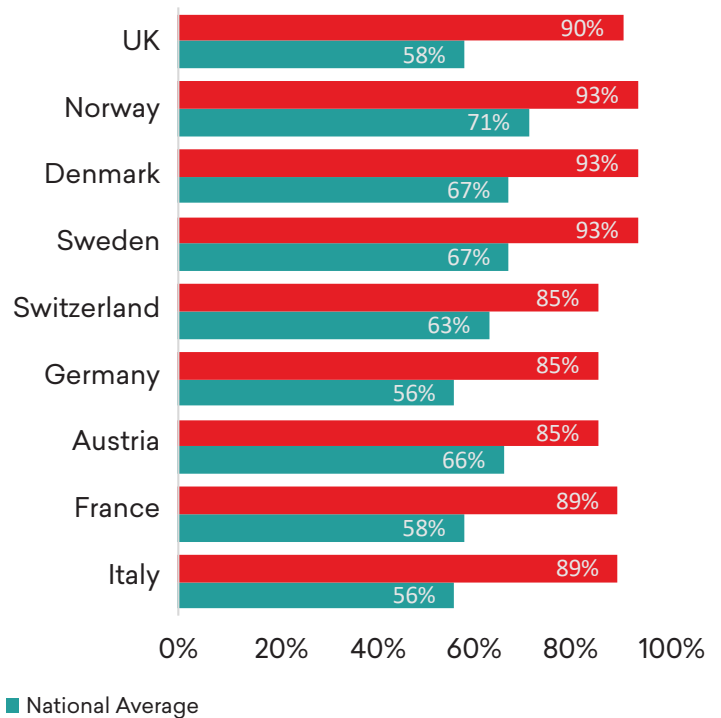
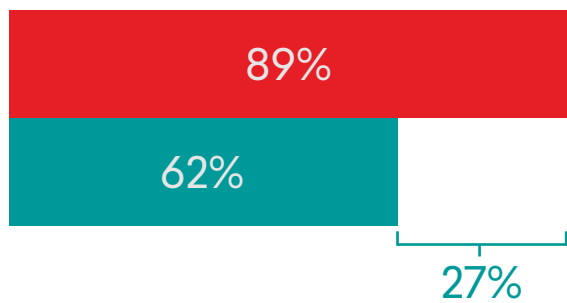


*People are encouraged to balance their work life and their personal life*

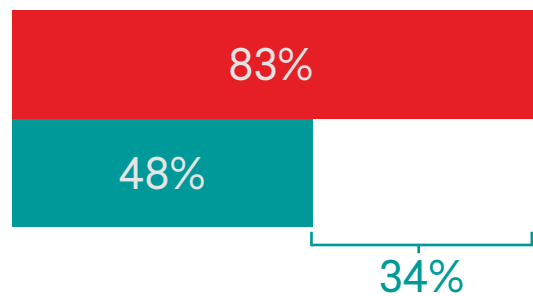


# Employee Perceptions in Best Workplaces™: Country-Level

*I am able to take time off from work when I think it's necessary*



*Management shows a sincere interest in me as a person, not just an employee*





# Best People Practices

For 30 years, organisations have told Great Place to Work® their stories through the Culture Audit®, a qualitative assessment of how companies create excellent workplaces for their employees. The Culture Audit® reflects a company's identity – their philosophy, values and the people practices taking place. Throughout time, this instrument has enabled us to identify the critical areas that help companies create a stronger workplace culture. Those areas stand on trust, pride, respect, and camaraderie; dedicating time and effort into creating people practices around these will maximise positive impact on the employee experience.

## Canon

Canon aims to build a long-term healthy organisation by encouraging and facilitating an active lifestyle, healthy diet and good balance between work and leisure. Through the “Healthy in Canon” project they offer various inclusive activities and offers, such as a monthly “walking lunch” featuring a short walk in the local neighbourhood with an arranged lunch. Every Wednesday after work, a workout class is also hosted by a gym instructor. Canon also has an after-hours gym room, guided mindfulness sessions, a fortnightly masseuse, weekly healthy dinner tips presented in the canteen as well as health tips of the month published on the intranet.



To help their employees practise positive wellbeing Cisco have created zones which help employees live the four elements of true health. They have introduced a Connect zone in their restaurant which encourages people to eat lunch together. The Eat zone in their restaurant has introduced more healthy options and a loyalty card. They've invested in an on-site gym in their Sweat zone, and their Think zone gives employees a quiet space to unwind, using nap pods and massage chairs.



Bio-Age Consultations are offered to all employees at Flight Centre free of charge by the in-house Healthwise team. During these consultations they test cholesterol, blood sugar levels and fitness levels, as well as discussing dietary habits, stress levels and health goals.



Amgen have groups of employees from around the world who compete on who will do the most steps in a month. The company also reserve two Fridays a month for a meeting up called “Friday Morning Energizer” where employees can get a healthy breakfast and group exercise.





# Best People Practices

Leading employers across Europe are introducing various ways of promoting healthy behaviours – across exercise, sleep, nutrition and mindfulness – as part of their internal wellbeing programmes.

## zetaservice

Zeta Service offers employees a corporate butler, with the possibility of support in personal services such as weekly postal fees, postal packages to the company and by courier, managing individual needs related to laundry and ironing, and pharmacy services. They also offer personal car maintenance with same-day pick-up and delivery, as well as having cars washed once a month with pick-up and delivery directly to the company.

## workhuman\*

Workhuman's 6-week Wellness Challenge allowed all employees the chance to learn more about their own wellness – physical, emotional, and social – to enhance themselves at home and in the workplace. Teams were formed and encouraged to work together on challenges such as group walks, sharing healthy dinner recipes as well as hula hoop, jump rope and dance video challenges. Other activities included healthy lunches, Ditch the Junk Food seminars, and weekly meditation classes to encourage taking time out. At the end of the challenge, winners were presented with awards and customised trophies to proudly display on their desks.

## janssen

At Janssen, female employees can extend breastfeeding time with their child. They provide a fully equipped breastfeeding room for mothers wanting to continue breastfeeding once they are back at work.

Moreover, Janssen contributes towards marriage (€961), birth (€480) and financial assistance for children under three years (€90 euros per month per child).

Working in the summer office - for one week a year, the company relocates to their summer office - a beautiful southern seaside location with well-equipped houses for working. After work, there is the possibility to use the time for relaxing and socialising in an exciting novel setting.

\*An Award-winning company in Germany requested to not to be disclosed.



# Stress and Wellbeing Across Europe – Concluding Thoughts

Where does the weight of responsibility around work-related stress lie between employers and employees? Everyone must carry responsibility for their wellbeing: speaking up and making changes in critical areas. Organisations need to create an environment where line managers and peers know to actively listen, and everyone can feel comfortable sharing their struggles.

Our research suggests that the two most prominent stress triggers at work are pressure to deliver and long hours of work. Over half of surveyed European companies had implemented support mechanisms, but only around a quarter actually measure stress levels. Yet the predominant approach to stress management should favour prevention, by ensuring the high quality and quantity of resources and keeping work demands reasonable. The challenge for all businesses is to become more proactive, rather than reactive.

It isn't just about stress, however. Chronic stress needs to be managed as a starting point, but the longer-term effort lies in enhancing wellbeing and resilience, allowing employees to thrive even under pressure. In addition to a culture of trust, transparency and authentic two-way communication, people practices around health and wellbeing can be a major contributor on this journey. While European organisations still have a long way to go, we found that for executives in France, Sweden and the Netherlands, health and wellbeing practices are at the forefront of stress management.

In our survey, the biggest gaps between unrecognised companies and Best Workplaces™ were around employees' perceptions of management showing a sincere and personalised interest, and of being involved in decisions affecting them – signalling the importance of an employee experience that makes one feel fully human, rather than a cog in a machine. This is consistent with values and ethics being a key driver of wellbeing in the workplace; people need to experience a sense of respect, justice and fundamental fairness.

Given that work affects people's wellbeing, and that wellbeing is vital for long-term organisational success, guarding the health and wellbeing of employees should be a strategic priority for all organisations. Not only is this the ethically right thing to do, it boosts the daily employee experience as a differentiating factor of great workplaces and ensures that workforce productivity is sustainable.

When we experience an ethical workplace that genuinely cares, we tend to give our best to the organisation.



# References

Unless otherwise indicated, all survey data is from the Great Place to Work® 2019 Study on Stress and Wellbeing at Work: A European Outlook.

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