THE BUSINESS CASE FOR FOCUSING ON EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH

A RESEARCH ANALYSIS OF HOW EMPLOYEES AND COMPANIES ARE DISCUSSING MENTAL HEALTH ON TWITTER AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HOW ORGANIZATIONS CAN ADDRESS IT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations are increasingly focused on addressing the mental health of their employees and for good reason: employee mental health has a large measurable impact on business and the bottom line. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention found that mental health conditions affect job satisfaction and how present or absent employees are in their work. Findings in this study also show that better employee mental health can contribute to increased employee productivity. However, there are several roadblocks in the way of achieving better employee well-being.

Several facets of modern work impact employee mental health in a negative way. The New York Times reported that the corporate push to restore pre-pandemic ways of working in a physical office is being met by employee concerns for their mental and emotional health. Another concern is burnout due to the high pressures of work, validated by the fact that burnout is now recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as an official syndrome.

To tackle this issue, the Institute for Public Relations and Cision examined conversations about mental health in the workplace with a focus on:

- Employee and employer perspectives
- Burnout
- Quiet quitting
- The four-day workweek
- Current corporate mental health initiatives

This report identifies the brands that are leading the way on Twitter in mental health conversations and provides evidence-based recommendations for leaders addressing mental health in the workplace.

METHODOLOGY

Using Brandwatch’s Consumer Research tool, we analyzed 1,304,110 Twitter posts discussing topics related to mental health and wellness in the workplace. We limited our collection to content from the United States during the period of January 1-October 31, 2022.
Organizations on Twitter who back their claims of supporting mental health are lauded on social media. On the other hand, organizations that showcased their mental health program but were accused of not doing so in practice were attacked.

Discussions surrounding mental health were driven by spikes of coverage focused on burnout with some polarizing opinions on the factors affecting it and coping mechanisms. Later in the year, “quiet quitting” was one of the most significant contributors of conversation after a TikTok post went viral.

Some employers are testing out the four-day workweek with mixed results, but most reactions are positive from both the employer and employee perspectives.

Gen Z and Millennials were the most frequent contributors to conversations about mental health.

Employees said employee resource groups (ERGs) and peers in the workplace were critical support programs for mental health.

Employees want benefits and policies to support their mental health such as flexibility, better time off policies, and stronger leave programs.
Some users expressed that they are now prioritizing quality of life above all else. They were not interested in climbing the corporate ladder or being promoted, but rather, they wanted to accomplish goals that contributed to their quality of life including financial stability and helping others. This perspective counteracts the overarching corporate narrative of the past where employees prioritized rising through the ranks and being promoted.

Twitter users called out the difference in priorities between employees and companies when it comes to mental health.

I actually don’t want to climb any corporate ladders. I don’t care about job titles. I don’t need accolades.

I just want to have income to fund my lifestyle, not be depressed, help other people, and be around good humans. Dassit.

53.9K Retweets 3,957 Quote Tweets 190.1K Likes

Paula Watson @paula_watson · Sep 14
Just seen this (shared on LinkedIn). Summarises my career goals perfectly now I’ve left academia. Thanks @theikonickay I couldn’t have put it so eloquently myself. #slowdown #followyourheart #thinkdifferently #appreciatenow
Users also discussed who was to blame for employee burnout. One Twitter user argued that the term “burnout” places the responsibility on the employee for improperly maintaining their workload, but the blame should be placed on organizations for mistreating employees.

Some users discussed work as just one source of stress in addition to other stressors in their lives, both in and out of the workplace. Stressors were exacerbated when employees did not like their job.
Others commented on the damage a job, especially one employees are unhappy about, can have on mental health.

Regardless of whether work plays a larger or smaller role in employees’ stress levels, mental health and burnout are issues that communicators and corporations must address. Through this analysis, we also found differences in age in terms of how users talked about mental health with Gen Z and Millennials driving the conversation.

Chances are that your mental health will be at its lowest point when you hate your current place of employment.

I can attest to that.

**David Grzybowski** @DavidGrzyTV · Feb 10, 2022

Seeing tweets that Ben Simmons will join the Nets on their road trip in Miami tomorrow. He claimed mental illness was his reason for not playing, yet miraculously he's cured the minute he's traded. What a middle finger to those who actually battle with mental health.

Show this thread

11:31 PM · Feb 10, 2022

392 Retweets 11 Quote Tweets 1,203 Likes
Gen Z Twitter users spoke frankly about mental health issues in the workplace. They openly criticized how companies have handled mental health issues in the past, commenting on how corporate attempts to remedy the issue such as employee assistance programs (EAPs) have been inadequate.

There was one group that employees trusted most to deal with mental health issues in the workplace: their peers. Users on Twitter applauded employee-run mental health/illness employee resource groups (ERGs) for serving as trusted, supportive communities.

S.LIZ @alizagna

employers after they give you a meditation app and an article on reducing stress:

caleb hearon @calebasyetthings · Apr 19

mental illness is over

1:28 PM · Apr 19, 2022 · Twitter Web App

4,643 Retweets 95 Quote Tweets 39.1K Likes

Andrew @ajcannizzaro · Apr 20

Replying to @alizagna

We started an employee resource group at my job around mental health/illness and I feel like creating safe, supported community spaces run by employees is the only way to broach this at work sometimes. Otherwise it’s untrustworthy. But that’s just been my experience.

1 7

Andrew @ajcannizzaro · Apr 20

Replying to @ajcannizzaro and @alizagna

The thing we started to notice is just that, especially in the US, there are no places to actually learn about mental health or illness built into anything. It’s a crapshoot if your doctor knows, and that’s if you even have one. So work had to become a place to just educate ppl.

1 7
Gen Z users also mentioned how work plays an outsized role in employee mental health.

Millennials primarily focused on the impact of return to office on mental health. One Twitter user detailed how the commute alone can lead to increased stress and anxiety. Another user replied to the tweet saying that return to office is “boomer talk”, indicating a perceived generational difference between Baby Boomers and Millennials.

Much like Gen Z Twitter users, Millennials expressed their disapproval with how their employer handled mental health issues. One user appeared to feel as if they weren’t being heard by their employer, sharing the following:
Some Millennials went so far as to quit their job without another job lined up to preserve their mental health.

However, topics of quitting, “quiet quitting”, and burnout were not limited to Millennials – users across the board were also addressing these issues.
Throughout 2022, spikes in conversations on social media were dominated by reactions to media coverage of timely burnout-related topics impacting the workplace as well as shares of viral videos. In the first half of the year, conversations about burnout centered around the healthcare industry, the impact of imposter syndrome, and whether burnout is a function of laziness (see chart). Imposter syndrome is a common mental state when people feel they may be a fraud or undeserving of their success. It creates additional psychological stress on employees and negatively impacts job performance and satisfaction. Mental Health Month is celebrated in May and was not mentioned often in online conversations about employee burnout.
In the second half of the year, the topic of “quiet-quitting” dominated conversations. According to Harvard Business Review, quiet quitting is defined as an employee who “opts out of tasks beyond one’s assigned duties and/or becoming less psychologically invested in work.” Researchers believe this can come at a cost to the organization, resulting in the loss of a critical competitive advantage.

Coupled with the idea of quiet quitting was discussions about people “acting their wage.” Employees on Twitter called out their employers pushing them to go above and beyond, equating this to “wage theft,” leading to “act your wage” becoming part of the online conversation.

They’re not quiet quitting, they’re acting their wage.

Workers aren’t “quiet-quitting” to avoid burnout. They’re refusing to have their labor stolen without compensation. Idk why there are so many bad articles about this.
The idea of wage theft shifts the blame onto employers for exploiting their employees. Some Twitter users were forthright when blaming managers for the quiet quitting phenomenon.

Buzz around quiet quitting was also generated by media outlets. Outlets on Twitter described the term as a recasting of a long-existing phenomenon: mentally disengaging from one’s work.
Some coverage, such as the article at left from The Washington Post, advised managers on the importance of understanding what could be driving employee disengagement. Other articles described what the term means to people doing various types of work or offered advice for employees feeling burned out who are inclined to quietly quit.

Media coverage of the topic was presented from multiple perspectives, but generally stopped short of placing blame on one party for the phenomenon, much unlike Tweets from employees airing their grievances.
Employees, the organizations, and the media addressed the advantages and disadvantages of the four-day workweek. Overwhelmingly, employees seemed to support the idea to help their mental and physical health.

Some organizations tested pilot programs for the four-day workweek, saying they thought worker productivity was as high or higher than with a traditional five-day week. Similar indications were noted in an NPR article. While it seems some of the advantages organizations have noted on the results of a four-day work week are fairly significant including less burnout as well as increased revenue and productivity, other leaders and employees identified challenges, such as scheduling issues and increased performance expectations from managers.
Other outlets shared that a shift to a four-day workweek attracts and retains talent.

However, it is important to note that shifting from five 8-hour days to four 10-hour days is not the key to alleviating employee burnout. Social media posts were insistent that employers must actually shorten the workweek without docking employee pay.
Some employers touted the benefits that moving to a four-day workweek has provided for their company, including increased revenue, productivity, quality of life, and improved mental health.

Employees on Twitter supported the idea of the four-day workweek to improve their workplace mental health and productivity.

Jack “Ciao Mindset” Califano
@jackcalifano

I don’t want 8K TVs and self driving cars. I want a 4 day work week and rent control.

9:02 PM · Apr 26, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

56.7K Retweets 1,702 Quote Tweets 382.9K Likes

Kyle
@inkyrelambert

My hypothesis: at this point tech companies with 4-day work weeks or 4-day work week rhythms would have a competitive advantage.

✔ Hiring & recruiting
✔ Employee retention
✔ The battle with burnout
   ? And probably productivity

10:45 AM · Jan 30, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

1 Retweet 17 Likes

Frank Bach
@zendaddy

remote + 4-day work week is the ultimate perk. offer this and your productivity will stay the same and your employee retention will skyrocket i promise.

10:48 PM · Aug 11, 2022 from Los Angeles, CA · Twitter for iPhone

386 Retweets 38 Quote Tweets 3,765 Likes

Chelsea Fagan
@Chelsea_Fagan

a four-day workweek increased our revenue and productivity as a company, and is also the single greatest boost in quality of life i have ever experienced lol

1:42 PM · Aug 19, 2022 · Twitter Web App

118 Retweets 7 Quote Tweets 1,497 Likes
Some employers also expressed how they had to overcome their apprehension to buy-into the new four-day week model. Employers implemented trial periods to determine whether a four-day workweek was the correct move for them.
The findings aren’t all doom and gloom – some corporations are taking action and leading the conversation about mental health in the workplace. Salesforce was particularly vocal about initiatives to support employee mental health, addressing issues associated with the isolation of remote work and pandemic-related challenges driving women to leave their jobs.
Other companies that posted about mental health included Cisco, BlackRock, Pfizer, T-Mobile, CVSHealth, and Deloitte.

CVSHealth President and CEO Karen Lynch was praised in a Tweet for vocalizing how COVID-19 damaged mental health. The Tweet also detailed a pledge from the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) that employers could sign to demonstrate ongoing commitment to employee mental health.
Deloitte published research on Gen Z and Millennials which underlined each generation’s stance on mental health and why it matters.

Other brands leveraged Mental Health Awareness Month and World Mental Health Day to raise awareness or show support for the issue. *Forbes* spotlighted PwC for making a large financial contribution to improving the well-being of its workforce during Mental Health Awareness Month in May.
FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERS

Companies have opportunities to address mental health in the workplace. Simply posting statements about mental health on social media will not be sufficient, evidenced by the discrepancy between companies’ and employees’ perspectives on the issue and disgruntled employee posts on Twitter. Here are a few recommendations companies should consider as they address workplace mental health:

1. PROVIDE BENEFITS SUCH AS “MENTAL HEALTH DAYS”

Offering benefits such as mental health days or granted days off that are “specifically geared toward mental health and burnout prevention” (Forbes, 2022) is one concept that employees rallied for on social media.

Professionals suggested other benefits include better time off policies, adequate parental leave, and offering flexible work options such as remote or hybrid work.
Through encouragement and training from leadership, managers should create a culture of belonging to prevent employee burnout and attrition (The Wall Street Journal, 2022). Managers should also be trained to promote well-being at work.
3. INVEST FINANCIALLY IN EMPLOYEE WELLNESS

Employers can invest in their workforce’s mental health through the healthcare plans they already offer, much like PwC did in their $2.4 billion investment in employee well-being.

There are several ways employers can take action, since financial resources will vary from company to company. Some suggestions include offering free visits with a mental health professional, reimbursing the cost of out-of-network mental health support, or offering free, comprehensive wellness programs to help employees improve their mental and emotional well-being.
Employee resource groups (ERGs) have been lauded by employees as an effective way for companies to support employee mental health.

Creating trusted communities for peers to share with one another is a benefit that employers can provide with little financial cost. Organizations can also provide opportunities for social networking within the organization, which is especially important if their workforce is remote. Company-sponsored events which foster a sense of community can be effective when coupled with management trained to foster a sense of belonging.

5. LISTEN TO EMPLOYEES ABOUT THEIR MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

Many employees posting on Twitter were forthright about what they believed organizations did well and where they fell short when it comes to mental health. Companies need to listen to their employees concerns and better understand their needs through research (e.g., focus groups, surveys, and social analysis).
Drastic changes in the workplace during and after the COVID-19 pandemic have been detrimental to employee mental health. As communication leaders strive to address this issue within their organizations, this research presents several key takeaways for leaders to consider.

Organizations should ensure that they are backing up their claims with action or risk being attacked by audiences on Twitter. Actions that can be taken to foster employee mental health include providing a “safe space” for employees to discuss challenges (particularly ERGs), offering more flexibility, and improving time off policies. Some organizations have also tested out a shortened work week.

As more organizations better understand how mental health impacts the bottom line and other important factors such as productivity and retention, they can take specific and impactful steps that can not only benefit them but society as a whole. “Quiet quitting,” burnout, or any other negative aspect of mental health that may be exacerbated in the workplace can be managed better by having a solid plan for proactively addressing these issues in the workplace and creating a culture of supporting mental health.

To learn more about employee communication, visit the IPR Organizational Communication Research Center. More resources on mental health can be found on the IPR Center for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (CDEI) Mental Health Resources Page.
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