Thrive at work

Curtin University
FUTURE OF WORK INSTITUTE

# Thriving Sustainably: Navigating the Complex Landscape of Workplace Mental Health

## A Thrive at Work Survey Insights Report

# Acknowledgements

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**Acknowledgement of Country (Boodjar)**
We respectfully acknowledge and pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past and present and acknowledge the diversity and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities today.

**Recognition of Lived Experience**
We recognise the individual and collective expertise of those with a living or lived experience of mental health conditions, alcohol, and other drug issues. We recognise their vital contribution at all levels and value the courage of those who share this unique perspective for the purpose of learning and growing together to achieve better outcomes for all.

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# Contents

About the Thrive at Work Initiative 4
Introduction 5
The Thrive at Work Survey 6
Exploring the full spectrum of workplace mental health 8
Thriving workers can also burn out 10
Understanding mental health's impact 12
Navigating the complexity of mental health strategies 15
The Thrive at Work Framework 16
Pulling the right levers 18
Unlocking an engaged and energised workforce 24
Our final takeaway 26
Glossary 28
References 29



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# About the Thrive at Work Initiative

Thrive at Work is a world-first wellbeing initiative centred on designing work that helps employees, organisations and industry to thrive. Led by the Future of Work Institute at Curtin University, Thrive at Work has been developed with leading mental health bodies – for and with businesses and government.

Our vision for Australia is one in which all working individuals – regardless of age, race, gender, job, industry, or organisation – thrive in their work.

The nation we envisage is one in which workplaces:

- Understand that proactive steps must be taken to combat rising levels of mental ill-health at work;
- Understand that wellbeing interventions must be focused on the design of work and not solely on individualistic strategies; and
- Benefit from, and cope with, technological and societal change – without sacrificing employee wellbeing.

In a thriving organisation, the mental health of all employees is protected and supported, regardless of cause. While supporting those experiencing a mental illness is a vital part of any wellbeing initiative, there is an opportunity to do more to protect against psychological harm and provide an environment that fosters the development of positive mental health. Work is more than just a place to survive each day. Good work provides opportunities for meaning, connection, learning and growth, supporting employees to thrive.



## About the Framework

The Thrive at Work initiative is underpinned by a world-leading, evidence-based framework that helps organisations to navigate the wealth of information on mental health at work.

To find out more about the Thrive at Work initiative, visit: **thriveatwork.org.au**

Thrive at work

# Introduction

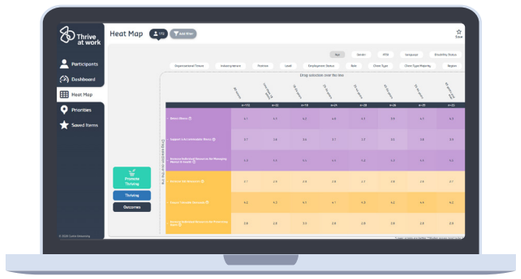
In today's world, the average worker will dedicate approximately 90,000 hours to their professional life. This amount is growing as the population ages. How work shapes mental health and overall wellbeing has become a subject of intense scrutiny. As a case in point, the change and disruption induced by COVID-19 shed a glaring light on the pivotal role that work and the working environment play in a healthy workforce and society. The evidence is clear: the quality of our work environments profoundly affects our mental and physical health. Workplaces that prioritise mental health can contribute to emotional growth, a sense of purpose, improved job performance, and even protect against cognitive decline as people age [1]. Conversely, workplaces that neglect mental health exact a heavy toll, causing harm to individuals' physical and mental wellbeing [2] and, through work-related mental health stress, contributes to lost productivity with an annual cost exceeding $17 billion [3]. This heightened awareness has led to unprecedented government and organisational investments aimed at cultivating healthier workplaces that address the diverse needs of workers.

Part of the challenge that we've observed is a significant gap between research evidence and the realities of workplaces. The goal of the Thrive at Work initiative has been to bridge this divide, and one of our key tools in achieving this goal is the Thrive at Work Survey- an evidence-based and systematic approach to understanding the employee experience at work. This report delves into key findings from the ongoing Thrive at Work Survey conducted among Australian workers and workplaces, and represents the culmination of our extensive efforts at the intersection of research and practice. This report aims to provide insightful findings and practical guidance for diverse audiences, including organisations, leaders, researchers, and policymakers.

Our findings from the survey convey vital messages that emphasise the multifaceted nature of mental health and the varied experiences individuals encounter in the workplace. Our research suggests that organisations are most effective when they recognise and address the entire spectrum of mental health, from addressing ill-health to promoting wellbeing. While creating a work environment that accommodates the full spectrum of mental health may seem daunting, adopting a systematic and integrated approach, such as that outlined by the Thrive at Work Framework, can help organisations navigate this challenge effectively. We hope this report serves as both an enlightening and valuable resource, contributing to the collective endeavour of creating mentally healthy workplaces and enhancing overall wellbeing.

# The Thrive at Work Survey

At the heart of the Thrive at Work initiative lies a crucial element: gaining deep insights into the employee experience. One of our primary tools for achieving this understanding is the Thrive at Work Survey. This survey plays a pivotal role in unveiling how workers perceive their work and how work influences their mental health and overall wellbeing. Aligning with our comprehensive Thrive at Work Framework, the survey draws upon extensive evidence from various research domains, including public health, occupational health and safety, work design, positive psychology, and human resource management, accumulated over decades. Through this survey, we capture a holistic view of worker perceptions regarding how effectively their work, workplace, and organisational environment contribute to three critical goals: mitigating illness, preventing harm, and promoting thriving.




The Thrive at Work Survey is administered through an interactive and secure platform which provides intuitive dashboards for both the individual and organisation.

**To find out more about the Thrive at Work Survey and Platform**, visit the website here.

## The survey is aligned to:

The Thrive at Work Framework – an integrative framework that draws together multidisciplinary academic research and industry best practice approaches to workplace mental health.

## The survey was developed using:

Reliable and validated measures from scientific research and tailored to Australian workplaces.

## The survey contains:

207 questions that quantify:

1. The full spectrum of workers' mental health (negative to positive mental health).
2. The employee experience of their work and workplace.

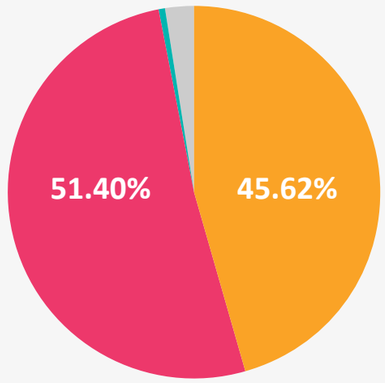
**The Thrive at Work Survey was completed online by 6813 workers from 13 Australian organisations between July 2020 and October 2023.**

Respondents came from varying industries including:

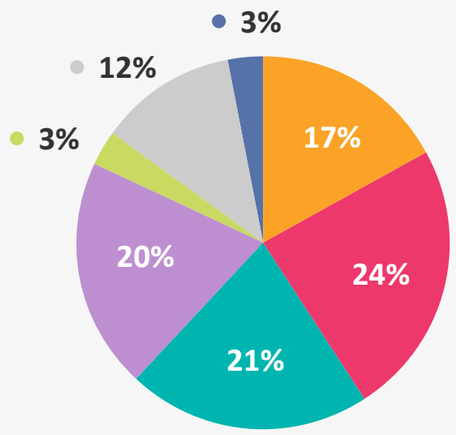
- Mining and energy
- Technology
- Education and training
- Healthcare and social assistance
- Transportation
- Public administration

Respondents had diverse roles and functions (e.g., professionals, technicians, community workers, sales, administration, machinery operators and labourers).

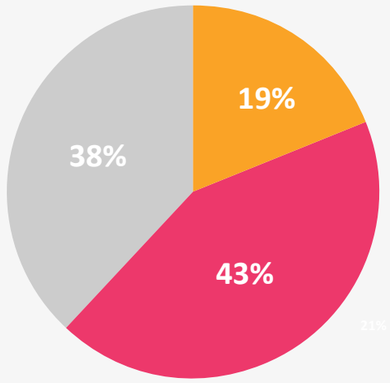
### GENDER



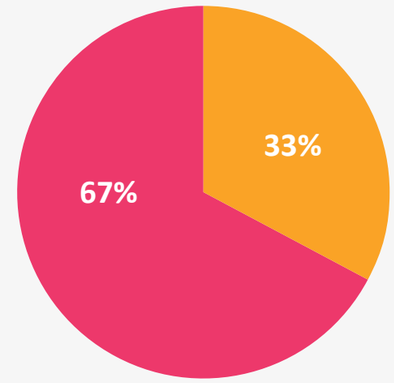

### AGE




### SUPERVISORY RESPONSIBILITY




### SECTOR



# Exploring the full spectrum of workplace mental health

## From distress to thriving

Much like physical health, mental health can be seen as operating on a spectrum, with ill-health at one end and wellbeing at the other [4,5,6]. However, workplace mental health is often viewed from the negative side of this spectrum, emphasising the management and treatment of conditions like depression and anxiety [7,8]. While addressing mental illness is crucial, especially given the rising prevalence of mental health issues [9], it is essential to recognise that mental health is more than the absence of illness and there is a growing call to broaden the conversation to encompass the entire mental health spectrum [8,10,11]. This shift aligns with the World Health Organization's contemporary definition of mental health: “a state of wellbeing in which every individual realises their potential, copes effectively with life's pressures, works productively, and contributes to their community".

Data from our Thrive at Work Survey provides one of the first comprehensive examinations of psychological and emotional states across the mental health spectrum for Australian workers (see Figure 1). Our findings echo the established body of evidence, supporting the multifaceted nature of mental health experiences. Delving into the negative indicators of mental health, we found that almost a fifth of workers (19%) experienced psychological distress at least a little of the time over a 30-day period. In line with some of our other research, there is a disproportionate burden of distress borne by younger workers, particularly those under 34 years old [12].

Our data uncovered issues with self-stigma for help-seeking, with one in six workers (16%) grappling with internalised negativity when contemplating seeking help for mental health concerns. Notably, there was a gendered dimension to this phenomenon, with men 1.5 times more likely to harbour feelings of inadequacy if they opt for professional support, a pattern that resonates with prior research on the gendered aspects of help-seeking stigma [13,14].

The presence of burnout was prominent in our data. Two in every five workers (38%) reported feelings of burnout, such as feeling emotionally drained and used up at the end of a workday. Workers with supervisory roles also fared worse, with supervisors 1.4 times more likely to experience feelings of burnout compared to non-supervisors. This is in line with previous research that supervisors tend to report the highest levels of job stress [15].

The state of positive mental health is equally important to understand and data from our Thrive at Work Survey shows that there is much good to acknowledge and celebrate. Notably, we found that almost 70% of workers were satisfied with their jobs and 77% were thriving. This is important because thriving workers are more than just content or happy – they feel fulfilled, possess a clear sense of purpose, and are actively oriented towards realising their potential [16,17,18].

While our findings are generally positive, some areas of positive mental health warrant consideration. For example, only a slight majority of workers (54%) felt committed to their organisations, suggesting that many workers don’t feel a personal or meaningful attachment to their organisation. Additionally, we observed a slight disparity in the levels of thriving between the public and private sectors (76% vs. 79%, respectively). A closer examination of the thriving data revealed that public sector employees exhibited slightly lower enthusiasm and energy in their work compared to their counterparts in the private sector. This aligns with recent research comparing public and private sector employees in Australia [19]. However, it is important to highlight that public and private sector workers experienced equally high amounts of other aspects of thriving, such as confidence in their abilities, purpose in their work, connectedness with others, and personal growth.

### The state of workers’ mental health: Looking across the whole spectrum

Figure 1.


Note: Comparative analysis involved comparing the proportion of respondents in each group (e.g., supervisors vs. non supervisors) that scored a 3.5 and above for a particular measure (possible scores ranged from 1 to 5). The measure Psychological Distress was scored differently to other outcomes, and thus required a different cutoff (i.e., scores of 2 and above).
Source: Future of Work Institute, Thrive at Work Survey, n = 6813

# Thriving workers can also burn out

## Unpacking the nuances of workplace mental health

Mental health is complex, and organisations can better understand their workforce by delving deeper into the nuances of worker perceptions. An intriguing finding from our Thrive at Work Survey is that workers can experience both positive and negative aspects of mental health at the same time. A closer examination of the 77% of workers reporting high levels of thriving revealed two distinct subgroups, each offering a unique perspective on the experience of wellbeing (refer to Figure 2).

The first subgroup comprises individuals we've termed **'Engaged and Energised'** workers. Encouragingly, our data showed that approximately 50% of the workers who were thriving also experienced little to no symptoms of burnout. This suggests that a significant portion of thriving workers experience positive mental health, characterised by confidence, energy, a sense of purpose, and a readiness for personal growth and development.

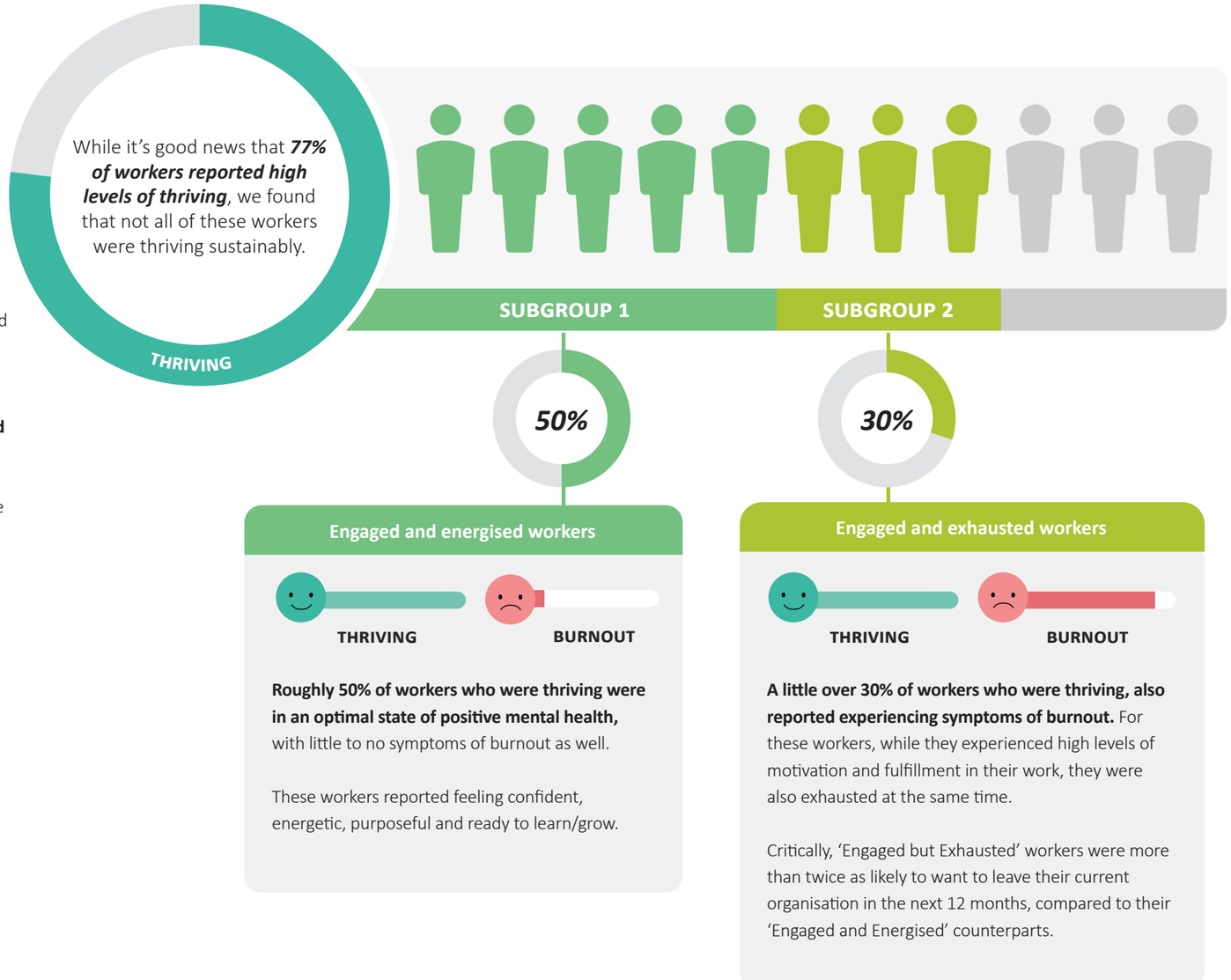
In contrast, the second subgroup consists of workers who are **'Engaged and Exhausted'**. Our data showed that a little over 30% of workers who were thriving, also reported high levels of burnout. While these individuals get substantial motivation and fulfilment from their work, they also grapple with exhaustion.

**Why is it important for organisations to recognise that thriving workers can also experience symptoms of burnout?**

Undoubtedly, a thriving workforce is an appealing objective. Our data reinforces this desirability, revealing that worker experiences of thriving showed the strongest relationship with task performance[1], suggesting an organisation's 'thrivers' are likely to also be their strongest performers. However, the **'Engaged and Exhausted'** subgroup of workers highlights a crucial insight: even individuals exhibiting aspects of positive mental health can succumb to stress. It appears that these workers are experiencing the right working conditions to stimulate engagement and motivation, however, this is not paired with the working conditions that allow them to be engaged sustainably (i.e., they're burning the candle at both ends). Notably, we found that **'Engaged and Exhausted'** workers were more than twice as likely to want to leave their organisation in the next 12 months, compared to **'Engaged and Energised'** workers. Consequently, it's reasonable to conclude that losing high-performing workers is an undesirable outcome for organisations. We return to these two subgroups of workers later in the report.

### There are different ways to thrive, and sustainability matters

Figure 2.




[1] As indicated by a correlational analysis

Note: 'Engaged and Energised' workers constituted respondents who scored 3.5 and above (out of a total score of 5) on the thriving measure and 2.5 and below on the burnout measure. 'Engaged and Exhausted' workers constituted workers who scored 3.5 and above (out of a total score of 5) on both thriving and burnout measure.

Comparative analysis involved comparing the proportion of respondents in the two group (i.e., 'Engaged and Energised' vs. 'Engaged and Exhausted') that scored ≥ 4 for turnover intentions (a score of 4 indicates they agreed they were intending to leave their current organisation in the next 12 months).

Source: Future of Work Institute, Thrive at Work Survey, n = 6813

# Understanding mental health's impact

## The power of embracing the full spectrum for better results in organisations

Over the last decade, extensive research has shed light on the costs of mental ill-health on business and organisational outcomes. For example, for Australian workplaces, the combined expenses of absenteeism and presenteeism caused by mental ill-health exceed $10 billion per year, with mental ill-health compensation claims amounting to $146 million per year [20]. However, this predominant focus on mental ill-health and its associated costs paints an incomplete picture.

Even though mental health exists on a spectrum, from negative to positive health, there is little discourse around why organisations should both prevent ill-health *and* support wellbeing. Findings from our Thrive at Work Survey paint a clearer picture of how the whole spectrum of mental health is critical for productivity and performance. When examining three key organisational outcomes: **Employee Turnover**, **Employee Performance**, and **Employee Proactive Behaviours**, we discerned that different states of mental health related to organisational outcomes in different ways[2] (see Figure 3).

Firstly, we considered **employee turnover intentions**[3]. Against a background of increasing competition for talent and rising labour costs, high levels of employee turnover carry considerable direct and indirect costs. We found that 13% of employees intended to leave their current employer within the next 12 months, and this intention to leave was related to both negative and positive indicators of mental health. Not only did high levels of burnout lead to increased turnover intentions, but high levels of thriving helped to lessen turnover intentions. This means that organisations looking to reduce employee turnover should be evaluating their workforces' mental health across the whole spectrum, as well as actioning strategies that reduce negative states *and* support positive states.

Secondly, we delved into **employee performance**[4] (i.e., how well workers believe they meet the expectations and requirements of their roles and how well they adapt to changes). Our data showed that positive indicators of mental health (such as job satisfaction, commitment to one's organisation, and thriving) were more strongly related to performance, than negative indicators (such as burnout and psychological distress). This suggests gains in employee performance are more likely to occur when organisations implement strategies that focus on promoting wellbeing, as opposed to preventing ill-health.

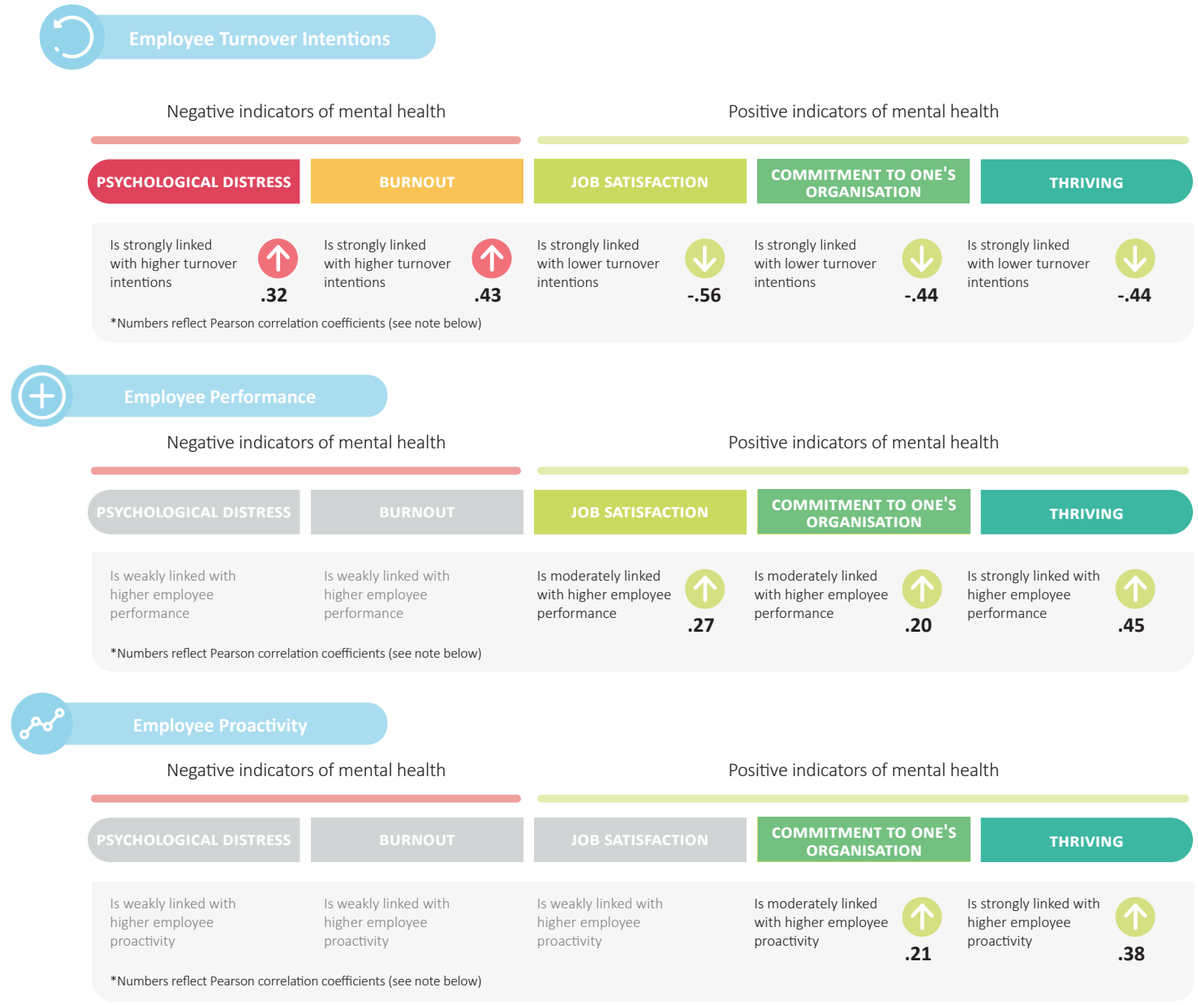
Lastly, we explored **employee proactivity**[5] (i.e., individual's actively taking control and 'making things happen') as an organisational outcome that is increasingly critical in a dynamic and unpredictable working environment. As we found with employee performance, employee proactivity showed a stronger relationship with positive mental health indicators compared to negative indicators. In particular, having a meaningful connection to one's organisation (i.e., organisational commitment) and being in a state of thriving, showed the strongest links with proactive employee behaviours.

Collectively, our findings suggest that organisations should be addressing a range of mental health states, to reap the most benefits. Strengthening employee performance and proactivity is best achieved by supporting positive mental health, such as ensuring workers are satisfied with their jobs, feel meaningful connection to their organisation and are actively engaged. On the other hand, preventing employee turnover is best achieved by tackling the full spectrum of mental health, from reducing and managing mental ill-health, to supporting employees to thrive.

Missed opportunities occur when organisations take a siloed or narrow approach. For instance, organisations aiming to solely alleviate negative aspects like burnout may fall short, as addressing burnout alone is unlikely to reduce turnover intentions or significantly improve employee performance. Likewise, a sole focus on enhancing employee thriving, while beneficial for performance, may not substantially impact turnover intentions because other psychological states such as psychological distress and burnout, are not being addressed.

### Connecting the whole spectrum of mental health to organisational outcomes

Figure 3.




Note: Figures shown represent results from correlational analyses. Pearson correlation coefficients measure the strength of a linear relationship between two measures. Correlation coefficients can range from-1 and 1 and a coefficient of 0 indicates no relationship is present between two measures. Negative coefficients indicate a negative relationship between two measures and positive coefficients indicate a positive relationship between two measures.
Deeply shaded mental health indicators in the above figure represent measures that demonstrated a significant correlation with an organisational outcome that was at least moderate in strength ($r > 0.2$) for the field of psychology. Moderate correlations = $r > 0.2$- 0.3 and strong correlations = $r > 0.3$ [21,22]. Greyed out measures in the above figure represent mental health indicators that demonstrated little to weak correlation with organisational outcomes ($r < 0.2$).
Source: Future of Work Institute, Thrive at Work Survey, n = 6813

[2]Relationships were derived from analyses that correlated mental health outcomes (i.e., psychological distress, burnout, job satisfaction, organisational commitment and thriving) with organisational outcomes (i.e., employee turnover intentions, employee performance, employee proactivity).
[3]Measured by asking respondents to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed they were intending to leave their current organisation in the next 12 months.
[4]Measured by asking respondents to rate the extent to which they agree or disagreed with four statements around their own performance on tasks and teamwork.
[5]Measured by asking respondents to rate the extent to which they agree or disagreed with three statements around their own proactive behaviours at work.

> **Collectively, our findings suggest that organisations should be addressing a range of mental health states, from burnout to thriving, to reap the most benefits.**

# Navigating the complexity of mental health strategies

## The Thrive at Work Framework

Now that we've established how various aspects of the mental health spectrum can affect organisational outcomes differently, the question arises: What steps should organisations take to effectively leverage the potential of their workforce?

Recent reports indicate a growing commitment from organisations to invest in mental health initiatives and expand the supports on offer for their employees [23,24]. These efforts span from awareness campaigns to leadership training, from employee assistance programs to designated mental health days. The intent is clear: organisations are increasingly deploying a diverse array of strategies to bolster mental health in the workplace.

However, amidst this abundance of options, a challenge emerges from our ongoing research: How can organisations navigate this complex landscape of practices and activities? Which strategies are best suited to address different aspects of mental wellbeing? Do workers within an organisation require different forms of support? And where should these interventions be targeted- at individuals, teams, leaders or entire departments?

The Thrive at Work Framework was created to address this very challenge (details on the next page). Developed in consultation with industry experts and informed by extensive academic research, the Thrive at Work Framework offers an evidence-based and holistic approach to understanding how various workplace practices, initiatives, and programs align to address the entire spectrum of mental health. Comprising nine key building blocks organised within three overarching pillars, this framework navigates the complexity of workplace mental health. Each pillar corresponds to a distinct facet of the mental health spectrum: helping people to get well (Mitigate Illness), stay well (Prevent Harm), and be the best they can be (Promote Thriving). These pillars align with notable distinctions in the literature on workplace mental health interventions [25,26]. Furthermore, they align with the National Mental Health Commission's Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces [27], featuring Protect (akin to our Prevent Harm), Respond (similar to our Mitigate Illness), and Promote (akin to our Promote Thriving).

# The Thrive at Work Framework

## Mitigate Illness - Monitor, accommodate and treat mental illness

The pillar of Mitigate Illness captures the workplace conditions and practices that support workers experiencing mental ill-health and injury.

**Detect Illness:** The workplace conditions and practices for monitoring and detecting mental ill-health. This can include building the capability of leaders and peers to recognise ill-health symptoms by providing mental health first aid training, as well as building HR/OSH systems to monitor mental health and wellbeing trends.

**Support and Accommodate Illness:** The workplace conditions and practices that support workers through illness and recovery. The focus here is on creating a barrier-free environment where workers feel confident to seek help (e.g., stigma-reduction educational programs), and providing readily accessible mental health support programs (e.g., Employee Assistance Programs).

**Increase Individual Resources for Managing Ill Health:** The practices that organisations can undertake to help build workers' own abilities to monitor their personal mental health and to seek appropriate help – for example, mental health literacy training.

## Prevent Harm - Minimise harm and prevent risk

The pillar of Prevent Harm captures the working conditions and practices that help to prevent psychosocial harm from occurring in the first place, with the focus being on a well-designed working environment.

**Increase Job Resources:** The workplace conditions and practices that help workers to cope with their work demands and achieve their work goals. This includes: 1) ***Stimulating*** work that is challenging and varied; 2) Supports for ***Mastery,*** such as job clarity and feedback that help workers to be competent performers; 3) Appropriate levels of ***Agency*** so workers have reasonable flexibility over where, when, and how they do their work, and 4) ***Relational*** supports such as colleague/supervisor support, and connections to wider society to enhance the purpose and meaning of work.

**Ensure Tolerable Demands:** The workplace conditions and practices that help to identify, reduce, or eliminate excessive stressors and demands in the environment. Common demands include mentally and/or physically intensive work, emotionally draining work, time pressure, and organisational hindrances. Example practices that can help make demands more tolerable include designing rosters to minimise fatigue, and providing sufficient consultation and transparency around organisational changes.

**Increase Personal Resources for Preventing Harm:** The practices that organisations can undertake to equip workers with the skills to manage, adapt to, and recover from stress. For example, training in workload management techniques and educational programs that increase workers' knowledge of the best ways to detach and recover during non-work hours.

**Prevent Harm through the SMART Work Design Model**

Embedded within the Prevent Harm pillar is the SMART model of work design. Developed by Prof. Sharon Parker at the Future of Work Institute, SMART is a model that employees and employers can use to design meaningful & motivating work.

The SMART Work Design model identifies 5 key job characteristics that result in positive outcomes across job and industries:

- ***Stimulating*** job resources
- ***Mastery*** job resources
- ***Agency*** job resources
- ***Relational*** job resources
- ***Tolerable*** demands

## Promote Thriving - Optimise well-being and generate future capabilities

The pillar of Promote Thriving captures the workplace conditions and practices that optimise worker wellbeing, and in the process, help workers to recognise and harness their potential for innovation and performance.

**Promote Purpose and Growth:** The workplace conditions and practices that give workers a sense of purpose and create the optimal conditions for workers' professional and personal development. Examples of such practices include programs for enhancing leadership capabilities and providing career development opportunities.

**Promote Connection:** The workplace conditions and practices that enable high-quality worker interactions and relationships. Examples of such practices include providing opportunities for cross-team collaborations and implementing strategies for diversity.

**Increase Personal Resources for Thriving:** The organisational practices that help to build workers' own abilities to craft their own growth and development for thriving. This can include positive psychology coaching programs, and training for workers on how to craft their work toward their interests or strengths.




## Benefits of an integrated approach

Our stance is that organisations should address the whole spectrum of mental health, from ill-health to thriving to unlock a broad range of advantages. To achieve this, an integrated approach, such as that outlined by the Thrive at Work Framework, is pivotal in realising these benefits.

Emerging evidence lends credence to our proposal. A recent study encompassing ten Canadian organisations demonstrated that those embracing a balanced approach—addressing the entire mental health spectrum—achieved superior returns on investment compared to organisations that solely intervened when individuals faced mental health challenges [23]. Data gleaned from our Thrive at Work Survey paints a similar picture. We compared organisations where the majority of employees perceived their workplace to sufficiently address all three Thrive at Work pillars, with organisations where workers felt only one or two pillars were adequately addressed[6]. Our findings revealed that organisations **with a more equitable and comprehensive focus across Mitigate Illness, Prevent Harm, and Promote Thriving, tended to exhibit superior outcomes**[7] among their workforce compared to the organisations with an unequal focus.

[6]This analysis compared the outcomes of two distinct groups of organisations. The first group consisted of organisations where at least 50% of the survey respondents rated each of the Thrive at Work pillars as 3.5 or higher. This rating was determined based on a composite score that considered all the variables associated with each pillar. The second group comprised all other organisations, meaning those where less than 50% of the respondents rated one or more Thrive at Work pillars at 3.5 or higher.

[7]These outcomes refer to lower burnout, higher job satisfaction, higher organisational commitment, high thriving, lower turnover and higher proactivity.

# Pulling the right levers

## Some workplace practices matter more than others

As mentioned earlier, organisations are deploying an increasing array of strategies to support mental wellbeing in the workplace. This section delves deeper into the specific workplace experiences and practices that we found to be the strongest predictors of mental health states across the spectrum. What we discovered is that within each of the Thrive at Work pillars: **Mitigate Illness**, **Prevent Harm** and **Promote Thriving**, certain workplace factors outperform as stronger predictors of mental health when compared to others[8].

### What workplace experiences and practices are most important for mitigating illness?

Within the Mitigate Illness pillar, our data showed that the strongest support for workers experiencing mental ill-health was the **Ability to Reshape Work to Accommodate a Mental Health Concern** (see Figure 4). This reshaping of work refers to workers being able to have input into or request adjustments in their work to support mental health concerns, such as having modified job roles, being able to work flexibly and being able to still engage in meaningful work while managing their ill-health. Critically, we found that workers who had the ability to reshape their work to support mental health concerns were three times less likely to experience psychological distress, and almost six times less likely to experience burnout compared to workers who felt they could not reshape their work in the case of mental ill-health.

Our findings also reveal a potential gap between the mental ill-health supports that are usually provided, and what's truly needed. Previous research shows that the most frequently provided mental health support in Australian workplaces are confidential counselling and advice services (e.g., Employee Assistance Programs [EAP]) [28]. While these confidential mental health services do play an important role in supporting workers through symptoms and experiences of psychological distress, these programs are often the least utilised type of support. Our data echoes this trend. Although we observed 75% of workeres reporting that they could access confidential mental health support services (such as EAPs and other confidential services), access to these services was not the strongest predictor of improved mental health outcomes. By contrast, even though the ability to reshape work to support a mental health concern was the strongest predictor, only 41% of workers believed they had this reshaping ability in their workplace.

Our observations are in line with prior research indicating that mental health supports primarily aimed at alleviating distress symptoms may not be fully effective in promoting overall workforce mental well-being. The data highlights the importance of empowering workers to modify their work environments, enabling them to proactively prevent further psychological distress and facilitate recovery from mental health conditions

### Key workplace experiences and practices within the Mitigate Illness pillar

Figure 4.

**Within the Mitigate Illness pillar, the workplace experience that was a key support for mental ill-health was*:**

The ability to reshape work to accommodate a mental health concern

**Workers who believed they had the ability to adjust or reshape their work for mental health concerns were:**

**3x**

more likely to have lower psychological distress

**5.8x**

less likely to experience symptoms of burnout

*Compared to those who believed they were unable to adjust or reshape their work for mental health concerns^.*

[8]Our regression analyses involve data from multiple organisations, leading to generalised findings and trends. However, it's important to note that specific organisations may have unique drivers that differ from the general trends identified in our analysis.

Note: *Regression analysis independent variables include supervisor wellbeing checks, confidence to recognise mental health concerns, confidence to support colleagues, availability of organisational supports for mental health, barriers to mental health care, perceived stigma to accessing mental health care, interpersonal barriers to workplace accommodations, organisational barriers to workplace accommodations, mental health self-awareness, and self-stigma to accessing care. The dependent variable analysed was burnout. The strongest predictor was determined based on the largest beta coefficient.

^Comparative analysis involved examining the proportion of respondents reporting low levels of negative mental health (i.e., low psychological distress and low burnout) by level of predictor variable reported (i.e., low/high ability to reshape work to accommodate a mental health concern).

Source: Future of Work Institute, Thrive at Work Survey, n = 6813

### What workplace experiences and practices are most important for preventing harm?

While we discovered that numerous workplace factors within the Prevent Harm pillar played crucial roles in influencing different aspects of mental health, some factors stood out as exceptionally potent drivers of mental health (refer to Figure 5).

*The best predictors of burnout: Job demands*
When we delved into the factors contributing to burnout, two job demands emerged as having the most significant impact: 1) **Excessive Time Pressure** and 2) **Unfair Organisational Practices**. The consequences of excessive time pressure are well understood. Constantly facing high workloads and tight deadlines are a well-known source of stress, and our data showed that 16% of workers report having too much work and 11% rarely found enough time to complete their tasks.

Unfair organisational practices were another significant source of stress - with 16% of workers reporting that they experience unfair practices in their workplace. Unfairness can include inconsistent or biased policy application, unclear or poorly communicated decision-making processes, and ineffective handling of workplace issues like underperformance or misconduct. In line with our data, existing research shows that unfair treatment can have profound negative consequences- decreasing worker motivation and increasing both health problems and sickness related leave [29] .

*The best predictors of wellbeing: Job resources*
Shifting our focus to the workplace factors that enhance wellbeing, two particular types of job resources emerge as significant drivers: 1) **Stimulating Work** and 2) **Mastery-Enabled Work**. Stimulating work refers to when workers are able to use a range of their skills to tackle a variety of tasks, and this work usually offers opportunities for creative problem-solving and innovation. Stimulating work is a valuable resource for workers because it fosters engagement and motivation, and opens doors for skill development and personal growth [30]. In our findings, we observed a remarkable trend – workers who rated their work highly stimulating were 16 times more likely to engage in ongoing learning than those without stimulating work.

Moving on to mastery-enabled work, this concept refers to when workers are provided with clear role expectations and regular performance feedback. This clarity and feedback empowers workers to better understand their responsibilities and how to excel in their roles. Mastery-enabled work is important because it aligns with the innate human desire to excel and be competent at work [31]. When individuals achieve competence in their roles, they experience a sense of accomplishment while simultaneously reducing stress and anxiety levels [32]. Our data highlighted the performance benefits of mastery-enabled work, such that workers who experience high levels of mastery elements were 22 times more likely to report engaging in high performance behaviours than workers who experience insufficient levels of mastery elements.

Combining our findings makes it clear that effectively preventing psychosocial risks involves a two-pronged approach to work design. This approach involves addressing factors that create excessive demands, like time pressure and unfair organisational practices, and ensuring that workers have ample job resources to fuel their engagement and performance. These resources include opportunities for stimulating work, and clear, feedback-rich role expectations. This dual-focused strategy aligns with decades of scientific evidence highlighting the most effective ways to design work to prevent harm and promote wellbeing [33].

> *Effectively preventing psychosocial risks involves a two-pronged approach to work design - making job demands tolerable and ensuring workers have ample job resources.*

Note: *Regression analysis independent variables include stimulating job resources, mastery job resources, agency job resources, relational job resources, thinking demands, organisational demands, load/time demands, emotional demands, relational demands, scheduling/location demands, environmental conditions, resource-seeking crafting, demands-reduction crafting, adaptive coping, resilience, and psychological detachment. The dependent variables analysed were burnout and thriving. The strongest predictors were determined vbased on the largest beta coefficients (for this analysis we highlighted the strongest two predictors that were demands, and the strongest two predictors that were job resources).

^Comparative analysis involved examining the proportion of respondents reporting specific levels of an outcome (i.e., high burnout, high meaning, high learning, high organisational commitment, high individual performance), by levels of a specific predictor variable reported (i.e., high/low time pressure, high/low unfair organisational practices, high/low stimulating work and high/low mastery-enabled work).

## Key workplace experiences and practices within the Prevent Harm pillar

Figure 5.

**Within the Prevent Harm pillar, the workplace experiences that were the biggest contributors to burnout were two job demands*:**

Excessive Time Pressure and Unfair Organisational Practices

**Workers who experienced excessive time pressure were:**

**15x**

more likely to experience symptoms of burnout

*Compared to workers who experienced tolerable time pressure^.*

**Workers who experienced unfair organisational practices were:**

**6x**

more likely to experience symptoms of burnout

*Compared to workers who experienced fair organisational practices^.*

**Within the Prevent Harm Pillar, the workplace experiences that were the biggest contributors to wellbeing were two job resources*:**

Stimulating Work and Mastery-Enabled Work

**Workers who experienced stimulating work were:**

**16x**

more likely to be learning new things and improving themselves at work

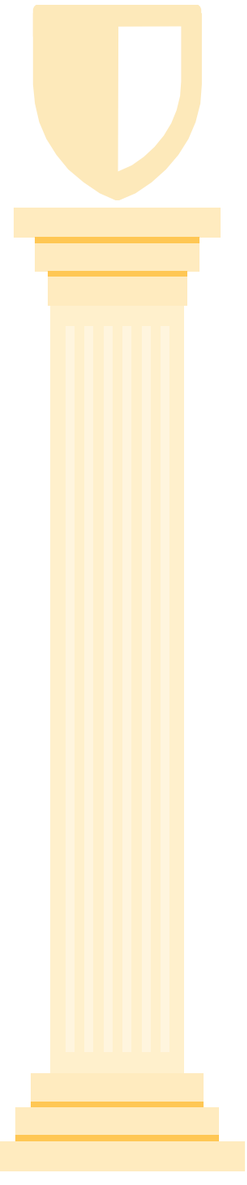
*Compared to workers who did not experience stimulating work^.*

**Workers who experienced mastery-enabled work were:**

**22x**

more likely to exhibit high performance behaviours

*Compared to workers who did not experience mastery-enabled work.*



**What workplace experiences and practices are most important for promoting thriving?**

Within the Promote Thriving pillar, one workplace factor stood out as the most powerful driver of employee wellbeing: **Organisational Support for the use of Employee Strengths** (refer to Figure 6). This type of support involves organisations providing opportunities for employees to tap into their skills and focus on honing their talents.

Harnessing employee strengths may seem like common sense, yet it is a relatively new approach that's still not widely embraced. Traditionally, organisations have concentrated on identifying and addressing employee weaknesses or rectifying dysfunctional skills, abilities, attitudes, or behaviours (i.e., a deficit-based approach) [34,35]. Think of traditional performance appraisal processes that require employees to work on their shortcomings or development needs. Research has shown relying solely on deficit-based approaches, which emphasise fixing weaknesses, can be frustrating and demoralising for employees, and these approaches often fail to improve performance [36,37]. By contrast, evidence suggests a combined approach (where both employee deficits and strengths are acknowledged and supported) is most effective. This is because when employees feel that their organisation recognises and utilises their strengths, it leads to a range of universally positive outcomes, such as increased employee engagement, higher life satisfaction, and improved resilience when facing workplace demands [38]. This is mirrored in our survey findings. Employees who believed their organisations cared about leveraging their talents and strengths were 10 times more likely to be thriving and 5 times more likely to be proactive in their work, among many other positive outcomes, compared to employees who did not believe their organisations cared about supporting their strengths and talents.

## Key workplace experiences and practices within the Promote Thriving pillar

Figure 6.

**Within the Promote Thriving pillar, the workplace experience that was the strongest contributor to positive wellbeing was:**

Perceiving that your employer provides opportunities for you to carry out work in a way that plays to your strengths*.

**Workers who believed their organisations focused on leveraging their talents and strengths were:**

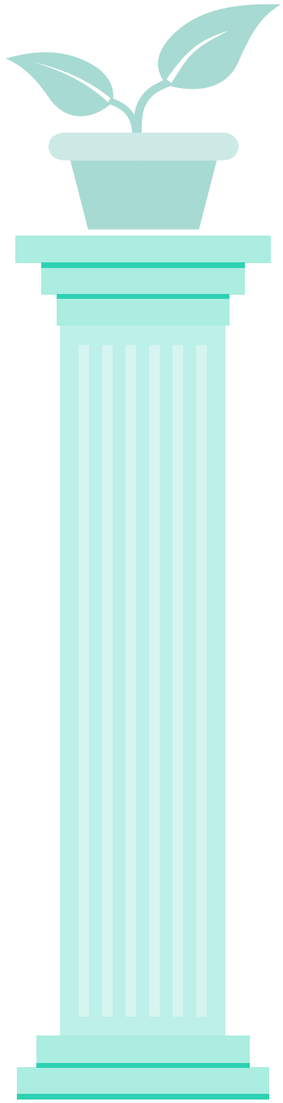
**10x** more likely to be thriving

**15x** more likely to be strongly committed to the organisation

**5x** more likely to be proactive in their work

**4.8x** more likely to exhibit high performance behaviours

*Compared to workers who believed their organisations did not focus on or support their talents and strengths^.*



Note: *Regression analysis independent variables include perceived organisational support, transformational leadership, perceived organisational support for strengths use, commitment to learning, career development mobility, team psychological safety, diversity climate, collaboration, community engagement, strengths crafting, interest crafting, relational crafting and positive psychology. The dependent variable analysed was thriving. The strongest predictors were determined based on the largest beta coefficients.

^Comparative analysis involved examining the proportion of respondents reporting specific levels of an outcome (i.e., high thriving, high proactivity, high organisational commitment, high individual performance), by specific level of a predictor variable reported (i.e., high/low perceived organisational support for strengths use).

Source: Future of Work Institute, Thrive at Work Survey, n = 6813

# Unlocking an engaged and energised workforce

We now revisit the two groups of thriving workers (introduced on page 10). It's safe to say that organisations desire a workforce composed of the first type of thriving worker—the '**Engaged and Energised** 'one. Equally important, it's a reasonable assumption that most, if not all, workers aspire to reach this state, where they feel motivated, purposeful, and capable of sustaining high-performance levels without succumbing to burnout. So, what can organisations do to create a workforce filled with '**Engaged and Energised**' workers? To find the answers, we've dug into the data from the Thrive at Work Survey to uncover the key distinctions in the working conditions between '**Engaged and Energised**' workers and '**Engaged and Exhausted**' workers.

Looking across the workplace experiences that corresponded with each Thrive at Work pillar, several key differences are evident, particularly in the Mitigate Illness and Prevent Harm pillars (see Figure 7):

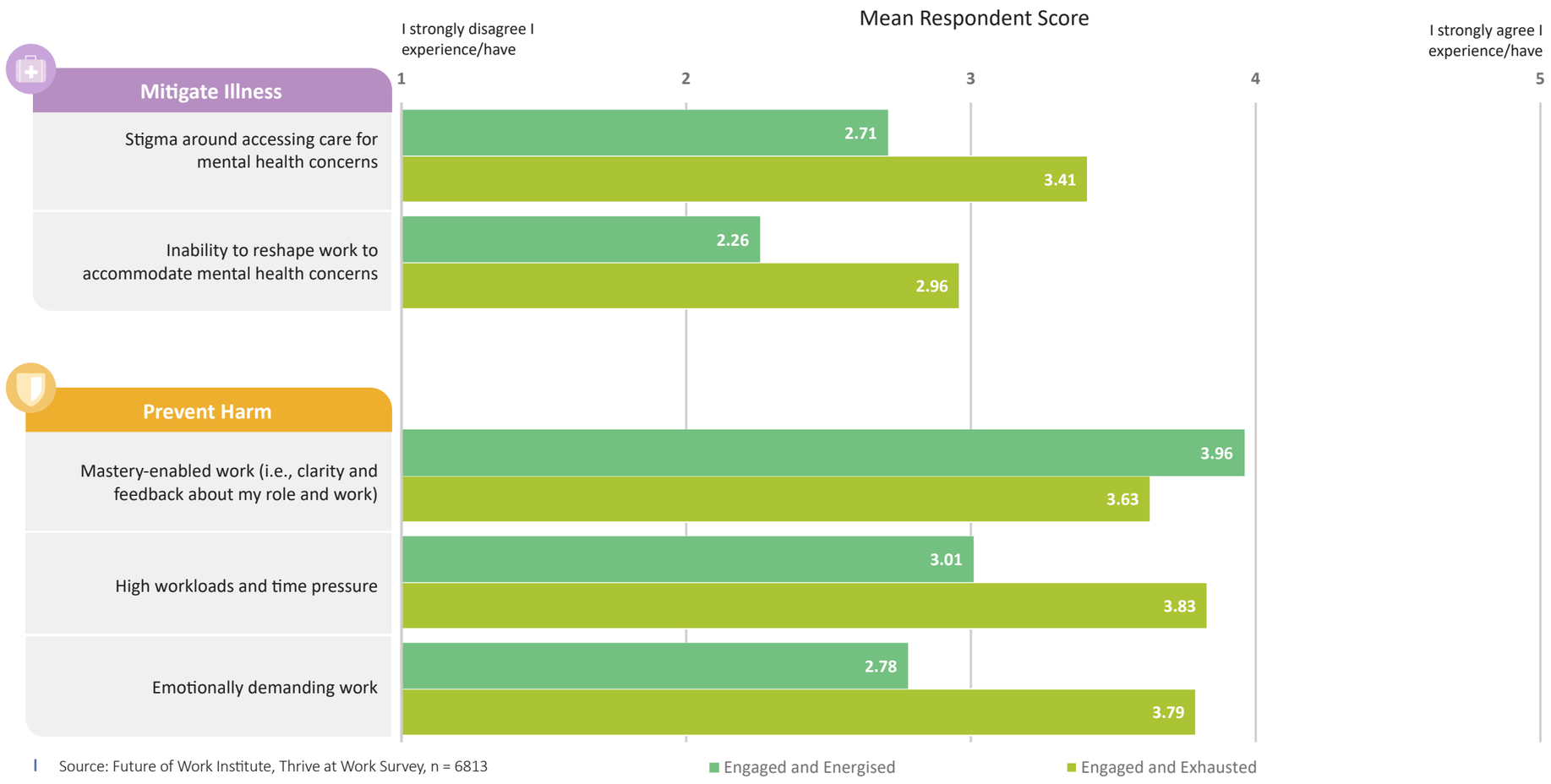
1. Compared to their '**Engaged and Energised**' counterparts, '**Engaged and Exhausted**' workers report feeling significantly higher levels of mental health stigma in their workplace that would deter them from seeking mental health care. Additionally, a higher proportion of '**Engaged and Exhausted**' workers report feeling that they do not have the ability to reshape or adjust their working environment to accommodate potential mental health concerns (e.g., being able to request flexible working conditions or modified role).

2. In general, '**Engaged and Exhausted**' workers experience fewer job resources than '**Engaged and Energised**' workers – particularly in terms of mastery-enabled work. Essentially, they report having less clarity around work goals and responsibilities and tend to receive less feedback to help them perform their tasks.

3. '**Engaged and Exhausted**' workers grapple with more intolerable demands in their work. They report facing significantly higher workloads, greater time pressure and more emotionally draining situations at work.

**Key differences in work and the working environment between 'Engaged and Exhausted' and 'Engaged and Energised' workers**

Figure 7.




Source: Future of Work Institute, Thrive at Work Survey, n = 6813

Together, these differences paint a clear picture. **'Engaged and Exhausted'** workers are doing more with less and feel that should their mental health take a turn for the worse, they have no choice but to soldier on. Conversely, **'Engaged and Energised'** workers experience a balanced interplay of demands and resources in their work, which sustains their motivation and provides them with a sense of control over how they can manage their work if their mental health declines.

# Our final takeaway

In many ways, the narrative of the two subgroups of thriving workers mirrors the broader challenges and opportunities that organisations encounter when supporting mental health at work.

Mental health is complex and workers can experience varying levels of wellness, burnout and illness simultaneously. To gain a genuine understanding of how their workforce is faring, organisations must pay attention to the whole spectrum of mental health. High motivation and engagement doesn't necessarily mean workers aren't dealing with exhaustion.

Organisations need to be mindful and ideally strategic in the types of workplace experiences, practices and supports they offer to workers. For instance, while providing stimulating work and professional development opportunities can boost motivation and engagement, it's essential to ensure manageable workloads and opportunities for workers to recuperate from stress and illness. Sustainability becomes a concern if these aspects are neglected.

The key to unlocking a thriving and sustainable workforce is an integrative approach toward workplace practices that addresses the full spectrum of mental health. This approach, as reflected in the Thrive at Work Framework, involves supporting workers to recover from illness, safeguarding against risks and harm, and optimising growth and potential.

# Glossary

**Burnout**: In the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), the WHO recognises burnout as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress. It is characterised by feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from one's job, and reduced professional efficacy. This report focuses on the energy depletion/ exhaustion component of burnout.

**Job demands**: The physical, psychological, social, or organisational aspects of a job that require sustained effort or skills from an individual. These demands can encompass a wide range of factors and tasks that workers must handle as part of their work responsibilities.

**Job resources:** The physical, psychological, social, or organisational factors that support and enhance an individual's ability to effectively cope with job demands, maintain wellbeing, and achieve positive work outcomes.

**Mental health:** A positive concept and more than just the absence of illness. In this report, the term mental health refers to a state of wellbeing where a person can realise their own potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully and contribute to their community.

**Mental health spectrum (or continuum):** A term that refers to the full range of mental health states that span from negative (e.g., distress) to positive (e.g., thriving) states. While the words 'spectrum' and 'continuum' are sometimes used interchangeably, they can emphasise slightly different aspects of mental health. The word 'spectrum' emphasises that individuals can experience a diverse range of mental health states, while the word 'continuum' emphasises that mental health can fluctuate over time.

**Mental ill-health**: A term that encompasses both mental illness and changes in emotion or behaviour that can impact a person's cognitive, emotional or social abilities but not to the extent that it meets the criteria for a mental illness diagnosis. These changes can result from life stressors and often resolve with time or when the individual's situation changes. These changes may develop into a mental illness if they persist or increase in severity.

**Mental illness:** A disorder diagnosed by a health professional that significantly interferes with a person's cognitive, emotional and/or social abilities. Mental illness can vary in both severity and duration. The term mental illness is used to refer to a wide spectrum of diagnosable conditions that affect how a person feels, thinks, behaves, and interacts with other people.

**Mental wellbeing:** Refers to positive states of emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing, which are linked to, but also independent of diagnosable mental health conditions.

**Psychological distress:** A state of emotional suffering characterised by symptoms of depression (e.g., loss of interest, sadness) and anxiety (e.g., feeling tense, restlessness).

**Psychosocial risk (or hazard):** Risks and/or hazards that arise from aspects of work such as the design or management of work, the work environment, equipment or behaviours and interactions in the workplace that may cause psychological harm.

**Thriving:** A state of positive wellbeing that combines the hedonic experience of happiness, with the eudaimonic elements of energy, personal growth, confidence in one's abilities, a sense of purpose and connectedness with others.



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## This report was developed as part of the Thrive at Work Initiative.

We aim to consistently improve the resources available through the Thrive at Work Initiative and welcome your case studies and/or feedback.

You can contact us by emailing:
**thriveatwork@curtin.edu.au**

## About Thrive at Work

Thrive at Work, is a world-first wellbeing initiative centred on designing work that helps employees, organisations and industry to thrive. Thrive at Work was developed by the Future of Work Institute (FoWI) at Curtin University.

For more information on Thrive at Work visit:
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## About Future of Work Institute

The Future of Work Institute (FoWI) engages with all sectors of the economy to improve work and support innovation. The Centre for Transformative Work Design is a key research team within FOWI. If you'd like more information about our research or are interested in working with us, please contact us.

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