oak
engage

Toxic Workplace Report 2023

What impact are toxic workplaces having on employees' mental and physical health, productivity and wellbeing?

We surveyed over 2,000 employees across different industries to understand their experiences and the effect on their lives. This report aims to shine a light on toxic workplaces and guide businesses to foster positive cultures with recommendations from industry experts.

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A message from our CEO

Welcome to our 2023 Toxic Workplace Report. We have launched this report because we believe that understanding and addressing toxic workplaces is essential to fostering healthy, productive and inclusive work environments.

Our research aims to shine a light on the detrimental impact of toxic workplace culture on the mental and physical wellbeing of employees. We surveyed over 2,000 employees across various industries and a staggering **75% of them have experienced a toxic workplace culture**. Of those, **87% of respondents also agreed that a toxic workplace culture has negatively affected their mental health.**

The statistics are alarming, highlighting the clear need for businesses to create healthier working environments for their people. This report is designed to highlight the realities of toxic workplaces and their impacts, but more than that, it also provides actionable guidance to businesses looking to cultivate a positive culture. We have included expert recommendations on fostering healthier environments that respect, value and nurture employees, in turn driving productivity and business success.

People make businesses great. That's why we want this report to be an expert voice to guide you to drive change, foster wellbeing and create thriving workplaces that not only benefit businesses, but also significantly enhance the lives of the people that form them.

Thank you for joining us on this journey to better understand and transform our workplaces to ensure a more inclusive and productive work culture.

We hope it makes a difference.
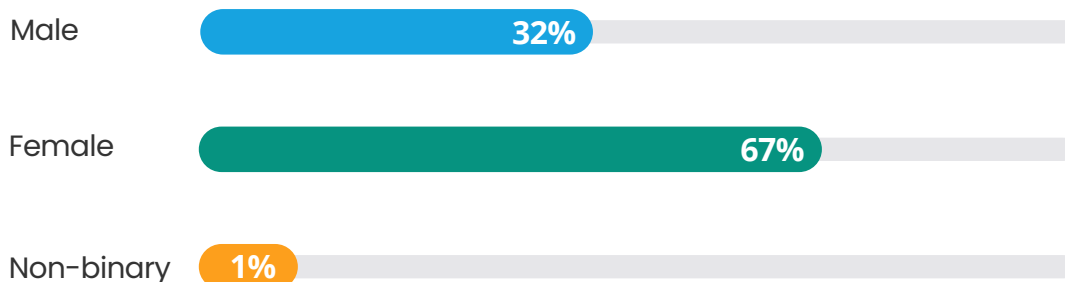

Will Murray, CEO of Oak Engage

Our research

We commissioned a survey between 24th May 2023 - 26th May 2023 with 2,022 employed respondents from a nationally representative sample of UK adults aged 16+. We also asked for case studies from anonymous employees with real life experiences to illustrate the impact of toxic workplace cultures.

Over 2,000 employees surveyed from across the UK

In all age groups from 16 to 55+

Identifies as:

Male **32%**

Female **67%**

Non-binary **1%**

Across a wide range of sectors:

Architecture, Engineering and Building **3%**

Healthcare **14%**

Arts & Culture **2%**

HR **3%**

Education **10%**

IT & Telecomms **8%**

Finance **9%**

Legal **3%**
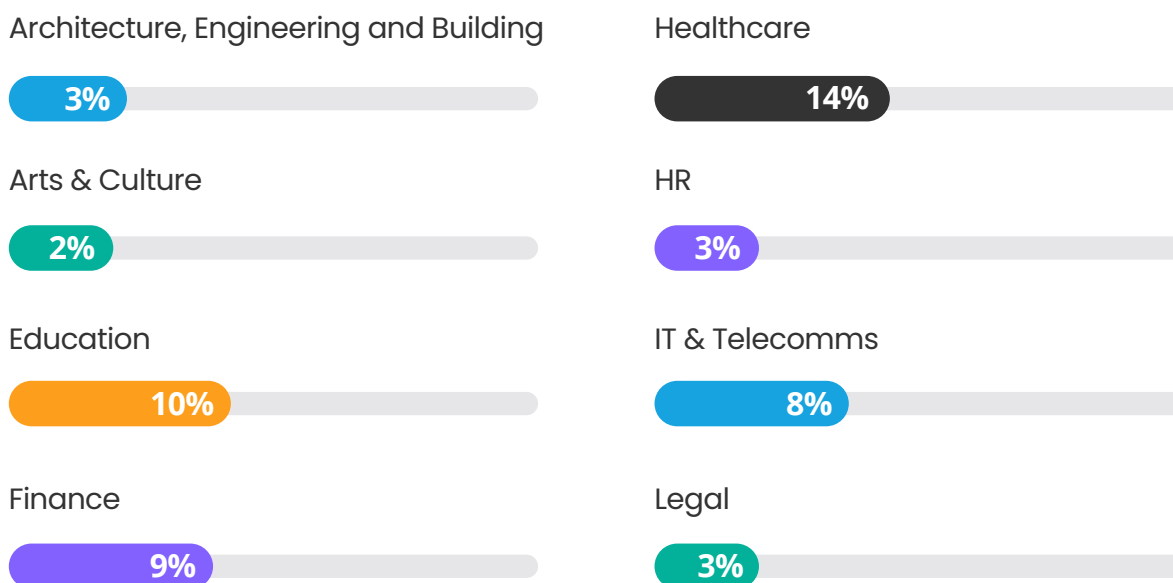
Our expert contributors

We asked experts in the industry to offer commentary to add another layer to the research, as well as practical recommendations that you can implement to address toxic workplace cultures. The following experts have shared their insights.

Jenni Field, Business Communications Expert & Author

Jenni is an international speaker, author, podcaster and business communications strategist. She has worked in communications for almost 20 years, specialising in helping teams and leaders use communication to take people (and the organisation) from chaos to calm.

Smriti Joshi, Lead Psychologist at Wysa

Wysa provides anonymous mental health support on-demand. Wysa's clinically proven AI-first approach enables employees to improve their mental health before symptoms become severe, and encourages them to take additional support when it's needed by guiding them towards Wysa's human coaching, your EAP or national crisis lines. Wysa has helped over 5 million people through 550 million AI conversations across 90 countries.

Katie Marlow, Business Communication Consultant & Internal Communication Specialist

Katie is dedicated to employee communication, leadership and culture, to help workplaces work better for business success. She built her consultancy, Little Bird Communication, to do just that.

Lisa Seagroatt, Healthy Workplace Culture Specialist

Lisa Seagroatt is the sole Founder of HR Fit for Purpose which is a multi award-winning HR consultancy specialising in helping businesses create healthy workplace cultures. Lisa used her own experience of a toxic workplace culture to create a successful business which celebrates its 6th anniversary during Mental Health Awareness Week in 2023.

Lisa Wheatcroft, Change Management Expert at Oriri

At its heart, The Oriri Partnership is all about driving change. Whether it's a short-term project or complex business challenge, we provide the strategic oversight required. From diagnosing problems, identifying gaps, creating the strategic solutions and driving it through to completion to create real transformation that leaves businesses in a better place.

Joe Robinson, Business Culture & Work-Life Balance Expert

Joe Robinson is an author, speaker and trainer on work-life balance and stress management. He has helped several businesses find a balance between productivity and employee engagement. Featuring on CNN, NBC and Wall Street Journal to name a few, Joe has become a respected voice in the field, helping to shape cultures and perception to accommodate work life balance. His new book Work Smarter, Live Better: The Science-Based Work-Life Balance and Stress Management Toolkit, is available on Amazon.

Key findings from our research

75% of UK employees admit they have experienced a toxic workplace culture, of those 83% gave a description of their experience.

We asked respondents, **who do you believe is most responsible for toxic workplace cultures?**

Middle managers	**33%**
Other employees	**28%**
Leadership (C-level)	**27.5%**
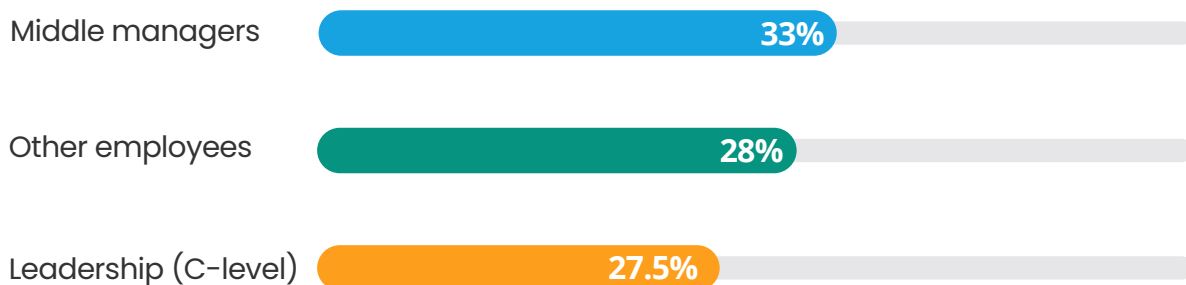
87% of employees agree that a toxic workplace culture has had a negative impact on their mental health

73% of employees agree that a toxic workplace culture has contributed to their burnout

71% of employees admitted they are likely to work from home in order to avoid toxic office cultures

61% of employees have resigned from a job due to workplace culture issues

Understanding toxic workplace cultures

What is a toxic workplace culture?

75% of respondents admitted they have experienced a toxic workplace culture but what does it mean and what are the signs? Toxic work environments can make employees feel a number of different ways including punished, rejected, guilty, defensive and humiliated. Employees find it difficult to work in this environment because of negative behaviours from management and other employees. Common behaviour includes bullying, yelling, manipulating and belittling.

We asked respondents, **what toxic behaviours have you been subjected to in the workplace?**

Feeling belittled in front of other employees

56%

Bullying

42%

Forced to work long hours

32%

Harassment

26%

Employees in a toxic work environment may be nervous to speak their minds, raise concerns or share thoughts because they are worried about being rejected or reprimanded. A toxic workplace can also lead to unethical behaviour such as racism, lying or making false promises.

Signs of a toxic workplace

The signs of a toxic work environment may vary based on the employee and their working styles and triggers. However, there are some common characteristics of a toxic workplace to watch out for. These can include:

1. **No room for mistakes**

2. **Lack of trust**

3. **Role confusion**

4. **Excessive stress**

5. **Office gossip**

6. **High turnover rates**

7. **Unhealthy work boundaries**

8. **Gaslighting**

9. **Lack of career support**

10. **Low morale and negativity**

"What is toxic to you could be somewhere I thrive. This is something I say to many people where I have experienced exactly this. I worked in a role that I enjoyed. It was challenging, emotionally brutal at times and described as toxic by many. But it was the place I learnt the most. We can be quick to label something but I'd always encourage people to know their own values and find a place of work that aligns to them – it won't be the same for everyone and that's ok."

Jenni Field, Business Communications Expert & Author

"People and their behaviour create a toxic culture – no matter where they go. For employers, there are several indicators which should give leaders cause for concern in terms of recognising the symptoms of a toxic workplace culture. High instances of sickness absence (particularly for stress related reasons) plus a high employee turnover are two of the key symptoms and should 'raise a red flag' to employers that something is going wrong. For example, if you have a high sickness absence/turnover occurring in just one department, it's likely that there's an issue with a senior employee within that department. Other symptoms include a worryingly high volume of grievances and/or disciplinaries which can indicate that employees are unhappy due to a toxic environment."

Lisa Seagroatt, Healthy Workplace Culture Specialist

We asked respondents, **please give a description of an experience or encounter that made you realise you were working in a toxic environment.**

Here's what some of them said (anonymously):

> "**Bullying** and **gaslighting**. Management didn't want to deal with it. Ended up working 16-hour days, 6 days a week to carry other team members who spend their whole time bullying others."

> "At my last job, my manager was really quite **abusive.** We had to have 3 meetings per shift to update her on the work we were doing for the day, nothing was ever good enough. She made me feel **anxious** and sad to come to work."

> "One of the most prominent signs of toxicity was the pervasive culture of **fear** and **intimidation**. The management style was characterised by constant micromanagement, public humiliation, and a lack of trust in employees' abilities."

> "First job after university in an IT company. The majority of the workers were male. They would often make sexually **inappropriate** comments to myself and another young woman."

> "I discovered an email in which two people were making very **negative** comments about my weight and looks. This is just one example of **toxicity** from co-workers and management that I had to endure while working there."

It might help to implement more awareness training around behaviours in the workplace so employees can recognise the signs of toxic behaviour such as bullying, harassment, micromanagement or discrimination. Awareness is the first step towards addressing the issue.

Expert Opinion from Smriti Joshi, Lead Psychologist

"Repeated threats and intimidation is the most commonly used tool by managers or leadership at a toxic workplace. The desire is to instil fear in employees with an intent to manipulate, harass, or underpay them and impede their growth opportunities. It robs an employee of their sense of safety and can make them feel very vulnerable and psychologically unsafe."

"Bullying and harassment can often go unnoticed in organisations under the disguise of getting work done, giving feedback or ensuring the team meets deadlines, or even 'just having some fun'."

"Lack of awareness around what bullying and harassment could look like at work can leave team members feeling confused. Some signs of bullying and harassment in the workplace are frequent use of abusive language, unwelcome comments and insults, or humiliation directed towards an employee. This may involve isolating an employee by excluding them from work-related meetings or social interactions. Additionally, such behaviour can include offering criticism even when employees are performing at their best."

Smriti Joshi, Lead Psychologist at Wysa

It may also be useful to be clear in policies and clearly define what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in the organisation and communicate this regularly. It's worth noting that the survey found that **34% of UK employees say the actions of their employer are unaligned to the values the organisation is trying to represent.** Just because a company decides their values doesn't mean it will resonate with employees.

"I think we need to turn it totally on its head. And I think really it's about focusing on behaviours because values can be just quite meaningless if you don't have the behaviours attached to them."

Jenni Field, Business Communications Expert & Author

Leadership & toxic workplace culture

Culture has to be set by the leadership team. They are the driving force behind it. This means there needs to be an alignment with their behaviours, words and actions in order to create a safe space for employees. However, our research paints a concerning picture of the relationship between leadership and a toxic workplace culture.

"**These findings are startling but not surprising.** What the employees in this survey tell us is reinforcing what many of us may know already. It's easy to talk about but taking action is so much harder. We know that leaders are key role models and they have the power to direct the changes needed in their organisations."

"We need leaders to put their weight behind culture change to give it the focus to happen throughout the organisation. We all own culture, but when leaders make it a priority, reflect on how their behaviour, communication and decision-making impacts culture we can really make the changes needed in these toxic workplaces."

Katie Marlow, Business Communication Consultant & Internal Communication Specialist

34%

Our survey revealed that 34% of UK employees say the actions of their employer are unaligned to the values the organisation is trying to represent.

As Lisa Seagroatt puts it "we are still not 'practising what we preach' when it comes to what we 'say' we do as a business."

This misalignment creates a breeding ground for toxic environments. Interestingly, when asked about the source of toxic workplace cultures, **27.5% of respondents placed the blame on leadership**, emphasising further that leaders play a significant role in shaping the culture within an organisation.

"Culture is led from the top; if a leader or any form of leadership is weak and sets a poor example, your culture will suffer as a consequence. Do not expect someone who isn't comfortable with a leadership role to 'naturally lead'. This is a recipe for disaster whether they are at the top, middle or bottom of any organisation. Employers need to think carefully before appointing people into key leadership roles and to ensure that you create your 'ideal person specification' as part of any robust recruitment process. As people are your most valuable asset, it's essential you find the right person to lead any team which will ensure that you achieve good employee retention and engagement."

Lisa Seagroatt, Healthy Workplace Culture Specialist

We asked respondents, who do you believe is most responsible for toxic workplace cultures?

Middle managers **33%**

Other employees **28%**

Leadership (C-level) **27.5%**
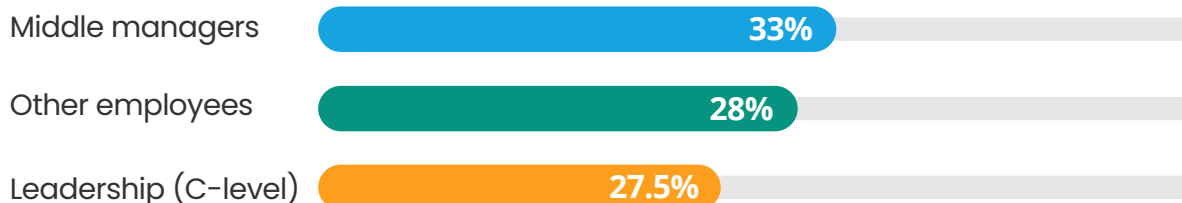
> **"The research tells us that middle managers play a crucial role and we have known this for years**. We must invest in their development and help them understand how communication and behaviours are linked and the impact that has on those they lead."

Jenni Field, Business Communications Expert & Author

Additionally, a staggering **81% of employees agreed that toxic workplace cultures often stem from leaders and managers lacking empathy.** This lack of empathy creates an environment where employees feel undervalued, unsupported and ultimately contributes to a toxic atmosphere. These statistics emphasise the crucial role leaders play in fostering a positive and healthy workplace culture and highlight the need for leadership development programs that prioritise empathy, values alignment and effective management practices.

Communicators need to take on the role of strategic advisor. They need to advise the leadership team when something hasn't worked. It's about being open and honest and giving them constructive feedback and the tools to be better communicators.

"Ultimately cultural change must be driven through great leadership. For me, leadership development and leadership capability has to be at the heart of any cultural change."

"I've seen similar situations in other organisations where there's high disengagement, high employee turnover and poor leadership which ultimately creates a bad experience for clients and the teams. Cultural change is not easy and it takes time."

Lisa Wheatcroft, Change Management Expert at Oriri

"As communicators, make sure that the leadership team are doing things the right way. Now this will depend on your culture. There may be examples where leaders have the best interactions but their behaviours don't demonstrate that."

Jenni Field, Business Communications Expert & Author

Discrimination in the workplace

The results based on workplace discrimination are both disheartening and eye-opening. They highlight the prevalence of discrimination across various groups. Age discrimination stands out with 24% of employees reporting such experiences, followed closely by gender discrimination at 21%. Race-based discrimination, including factors such as colour, nationality, ethnicity, or national origin, affected 14% of respondents. Other forms of discrimination reported include pregnancy or maternity leave (11%), disability (10%), sexuality (9%), religion or beliefs (8%), being married or in a civil partnership (5%), and gender reassignment (5%).

We asked respondents, **do you feel like you have been discriminated against in work for anything?**

Age

24%

Gender

21%

Race, including: colour, nationality, ethnicity or national origin

14%

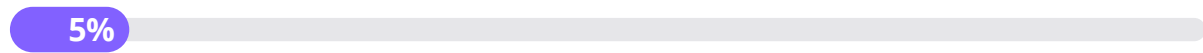Being pregnant or on maternity leave

11%

Disability

10%

Sexuality

9%

Religion or beliefs

8%

Being married or in a civil partnership

5%

Gender reassignment

5%

Lisa Seagroatt, Healthy Workplace Culture specialist states: "I'm not surprised that age discrimination scored the highest as ageism is still 'alive and well' which is often due to a complete lack of up-to-date training so attitudes lag behind."

Furthermore, the survey reveals that women are more likely to encounter a toxic workplace culture than their male counterparts. Additionally, it is noteworthy that individuals aged 25-34 are most susceptible to experiencing discrimination in the workplace. These statistics emphasise the need for proactive measures to combat discrimination, including robust anti-discrimination policies, training programs, and fostering inclusive and respectful work environments that celebrate diversity. It is imperative for organisations to promote equality and eradicate discrimination in all its forms to ensure a fair and supportive workplace for all employees.

"It starts with a fair and transparent culture supported by training, training and more training! Every business should have key policies in place including an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy which then needs to be shared with everyone in the workplace through an annual training programme. Employees should feel able to raise concerns if they feel that they are being discriminated against, so operating an open door policy on 'speaking up' when something doesn't feel right is really important."

Lisa Seagroatt, Healthy Workplace Culture Specialist

"Policies should be aligned to the business objectives and the values. Your proactive measure is taking the time to be intentional about this and be clear with employees about what it all means. There is a lot of education needed and we jump to quick fixes of training workshops when it's deeper than that and it needs strategic thinking."

Jenni Field, Business Communications Expert & Author

"**Discrimination on any basis creates a hostile work environment, gives rise to a culture of fear and discomfort, and undermines an organisation's core values.** Making sexually inappropriate comments is not just discriminatory in nature but reflects harassment and there should be zero tolerance amongst the employees, as well as for leadership for any such behaviours."

"Diversity and inclusion can bring in far more benefits for an organisation than one can imagine. Embracing inclusivity helps create a safe space for employees and brings in talent from diverse backgrounds with different perspectives, experiences and skills. This culture of diversity and inclusion can lead to enhanced creativity, innovation, and problem-solving within the organisation."

Smriti Joshi, Lead Psychologist at Wysa

Toxic behaviours in the workplace

The statistics on toxic behaviours in the workplace are deeply concerning and indicate a distressing reality for many employees. A significant 56% of respondents admitted to being subjected to the demoralising experience of being belittled in front of their colleagues, while 42% reported incidents of bullying. Additionally, 32% of employees have been coerced into working long hours, potentially leading to burnout and decreased job satisfaction.

Disturbingly, **26% of respondents disclosed experiencing harassment, highlighting a serious violation of their rights and wellbeing.** These statistics shed light on the pervasive presence of toxic behaviours that can significantly impact an individual's mental health, self-esteem and overall job performance.

We asked respondents, **what toxic behaviours, if any, have you been subjected to in the workplace?**

Feeling belittled in front of other employees

56%

Bullying

42%

Forced to work long hours

32%

Harassment

26%

I have not been subjected to any toxic behaviours in the workplace

7%

It is imperative for organisations to prioritise creating a safe and respectful work environment, implementing comprehensive policies against harassment and bullying and fostering a culture of empathy, support and accountability. Addressing these toxic behaviours is crucial for promoting employee wellbeing, productivity and overall organisational success.

"When you identify toxic behaviours and cultures you need to take swift and decisive action, identifying these behaviours and making sure they are stopped, creating the safe working environments where people can be themselves without fear of someone else's behaviour towards them." - **Katie Marlow, Business Communication Consultant & Internal Communication Specialist**

"Leadership that exhibits abusive or toxic traits often leans towards micromanagement and invalidation. In such situations, putting healthy boundaries in place becomes challenging for employees. They are caught between the concern of unintentionally offending their manager and the prospect of facing more criticism."

"It's essential to remember that fostering healthy boundaries not only empowers employees to express their needs and concerns effectively, but also aids in the effective management of workloads. This proactive approach helps prevent overwhelming responsibilities, ultimately leading to lower stress levels and improved mental wellbeing. The process of establishing, respecting and maintaining your own boundaries serves as a means of self-validation, enhancing self-respect and boosting self-esteem."

Smriti Joshi, Lead Psychologist at Wysa

The impact of toxic workplace cultures

A toxic workplace can have a negative impact on both the business and the employee. Our research highlights the significant negative outcomes that result from having a toxic culture in an organisation. According to employees, several key aspects are hindered by such a culture. Firstly, a substantial **67% of employees believe that employee retention is adversely affected by a negative culture.** This suggests that a toxic environment leads to higher turnover rates and difficulty in retaining talented individuals. Secondly, the overall happiness of employees is compromised, with **63% acknowledging the negative impact of a negative culture on their wellbeing and job satisfaction.** Additionally, productivity suffers, as reported by 54% of employees.

A toxic culture creates an environment that hampers motivation, engagement and the ability to perform at one's best. Furthermore, **43% of employees believe that a negative culture influences employee attendance**, indicating that an unhealthy workplace environment may contribute to increased absenteeism. Lastly, **collaboration is hindered, as noted by 39% of employees,** which suggests that toxic cultures create barriers to effective teamwork, communication and the sharing of ideas. These statistics underscore the importance of cultivating a positive culture that fosters employee retention, happiness, productivity, attendance and collaboration. Creating an environment of respect, support and open communication can lead to improved outcomes in these crucial areas, benefiting both employees and the overall success of the organisation.

We asked respondents, **what do you believe is hindered by having a negative culture in an organisation?**

Employee retention

67%

Overall happiness of employees

63%

Productivity

54%

Employee attendance

43%

Collaboration

39%

What is the impact of a toxic workplace culture?

"For many, it's what the survey tells us. But we have to talk about what this really means to individuals. The impact isn't generic and trying to be generic with a solution will just lead to this getting worse. Treat people as individuals, understand what they need to thrive and create mechanisms to enable that."

Jenni Field, Business Communications Expert & Author

"Loss on a very large scale. Let's remember that people are your most valuable asset, so we do not want to lose them do we? Other factors to consider include loss of customers/clients, loss of income/funding/donations and loss of reputation. Add all of these factors together and your business can collapse completely."

Lisa Seagroatt, Healthy Workplace Culture Specialist

71% of employees admitted they are likely to work from home in order to avoid toxic office cultures, highlighting the impact of negative workplace environments on employee behaviour. It indicates that a significant majority of workers feel compelled to seek refuge in remote work arrangements to escape the toxicity within their office.

This statistic underscores the detrimental effects of toxic office cultures, which can lead to increased stress, reduced job satisfaction and even physical and mental health issues. The desire to work from home as a means of avoidance reflects the importance of creating positive work environments that prioritise respect, open communication and collaboration.

By addressing the root causes of toxicity and fostering a healthy workplace culture, organisations can create an environment that not only retains talented employees but also promotes their overall wellbeing and productivity.

What effect can a toxic workplace have on employees?

Our research highlights the detrimental effects of a toxic workplace culture on employees' mental health and wellbeing.

Mental health

An overwhelming **87% of employees agree that such an environment has had a negative impact on their mental health,** emphasising the profound toll it can take on individuals. The high prevalence of this negative impact suggests that toxic workplace cultures foster stress, anxiety and other mental health challenges among employees.

> **"Workplace toxicity can take a toll on your mental health, leading to increased stress, anxiety, depression and other emotional challenges.** Seeking mental health support is often considered as a sign of weakness, but in reality it's a sign of courage and self compassion and will help you feel empowered and supported."
>
> **Smriti Joshi,** Lead Psychologist at Wysa

"**Every single one of us has both mental as well as physical health needs.** The only difference is that physical health needs are often more obvious so it's important for employers to create a culture where employees feel able to seek support when they need to. Business leaders and people managers play a key role here in ensuring they create working environments where employees feel 'safe' to raise any issues linked to mental health. A healthy workplace culture of openness, transparency and good communication from the top down helps to create safe working environments."

"Having experienced a mental health breakdown caused by bullying in the workplace, I'm always 'drawn' to statistics around poor workplace culture as I have experienced and seen the detrimental effect such culture has on both people and the organisations they may work within. Recognition of the damage that can be done as a consequence is encouraging but there's still a long way to go. "

Lisa Seagroatt, Healthy Workplace Culture Specialist

Burnout

Additionally, **73% of employees agree that a toxic workplace culture has contributed to their burnout,** further demonstrating the strain and exhaustion experienced in such environments. Burnout can lead to decreased productivity, job dissatisfaction and even physical health issues. This research highlights the urgent need for organisations to prioritise creating a positive and supportive work environment that values employee wellbeing. Implementing policies that address toxic behaviours, providing resources for mental health support and fostering a culture of respect and empathy can help mitigate these negative effects and promote a healthier and more productive workforce.

Expert opinion from Joe Robinson, Business Culture & Work-Life Balance Expert

"Based on working individually with burned-out clients and training with teams and organisations, the main triggering events are excessive hours, no boundaries, not enough support and no recovery strategies. The stress continues to orbit brains in a pattern called rumination. This gives the hare-brained false beliefs and catastrophic thoughts triggered by stress credence, the more we think about them - but they're bogus."

"Employers need to know that excessive hours and lack of boundaries are relentless demotivating tools. We are in the knowledge economy, where productivity is a function of an energised, focused brain. Burnout gives the opposite."

If you want to prevent employees from burning out:

• Rein in overwork and chronic 50-hour plus work weeks.

• Set boundaries on an unbounded world: check emails at designated times, shut off notification sounds and alerts and no work email or calls after business hours.

• Get people the support they need. When someone leaves and they are not replaced, the remaining folks may be able to cope for a little while, but after that comes burnout.

• Encourage recharding and refuelling throughout the day with frequent breaks.

"Every company should have a stress management strategy and regular employee training if they want to prevent employees from burning out."

Joe Robinson, Business Culture & Work-Life Balance Expert

Recruitment and workplace culture

61%

A staggering **61% of employees have resigned from a job due to workplace culture issues,** indicating the severe consequences of toxic environments on talent retention.

47%

Furthermore, **47% of employees believe that businesses with toxic work environments include 'red flags' in their job descriptions.**

Among the listed red flags, the ability to manage stress (46%) and work under pressure (45%) were perceived as key indicators of potential toxicity. Additionally, phrases like fast-paced environment (39%), high-performance culture (37%), and wearing many hats (28%) were also seen as red flags associated with toxic workplace cultures.

These statistics highlight the importance for organisations to be mindful of how they present job descriptions and company values during the recruitment process. By transparently addressing workplace culture, promoting work-life balance and emphasising supportive environments, organisations can attract and retain top talent while avoiding the negative consequences of toxic cultures on recruitment and employee turnover.

We asked employees, **what, in a job description, would you deem as a 'red flag?'**
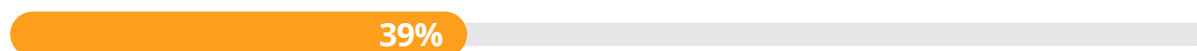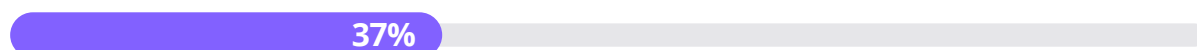
Ability to manage stress
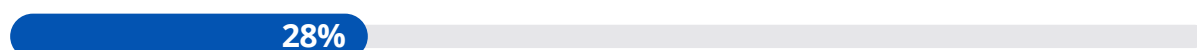
46%
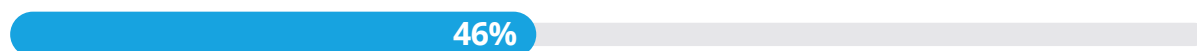
Ability to work under pressure

45%

Fast-paced environment

39%

High-performance culture

37%

Wearing many hats

28%
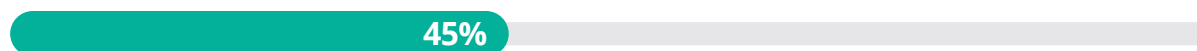
Toxic workplaces are a rising concern. As the data from our survey suggests, a significant portion of employees have left jobs due to unfavourable workplace cultures, emphasising that this isn't a minor issue or isolated to a few industries.

The reported 61% attrition rate due to workplace culture issues is not just a HR challenge, it's a business problem. It costs businesses a significant amount to replace talent, not just in monetary terms but also in terms of lost productivity, team morale and business continuity.

Interestingly, the perception of 'red flags' in job descriptions adds a new dimension to the conversation. Potential employees have become savvier in identifying code words that might indicate a toxic environment. While terms like 'ability to manage stress' and 'fast-paced environment' can be genuine requirements for certain roles, their overuse or misuse can be off-putting to potential hires.

"Being clear about the development opportunities and progression for individuals is a big one that is constantly missing from the hiring phase."

Jenni Field, Business Communications Expert & Author

It's crucial to understand that what might seem like regular terminology to hiring managers or HR professionals can be interpreted differently by job seekers. For instance, 'high-performance culture' could be seen by some as a code for unrealistic expectations and long working hours, while 'wearing many hats' might be seen as a lack of role clarity and potential overburdening.

Echoing what Jenni said, businesses need to be transparent in their job descriptions in order to attract and retain talent. In a panic to present a role as challenging and dynamic, companies often neglect to address the more human elements of a role - personal growth, development opportunities and clear progression paths. When these crucial elements are left out, they inadvertently signal that the company is more focused on getting work done than the holistic development of its employees.

"**Be clear and honest about the job role you are recruiting for. Make sure your business values are also represented throughout the job description but more importantly, always take a step back and think about the person you want to recruit for the role, as this is far more important than the job itself.** You want the right person in the right role with the right skills who is the right fit for your organisation. Just recruiting to 'fill the role' as opposed to 'finding the right person for the role' will often result in difficulties in both attracting and retaining the right people. Don't make promises you can't keep (i.e., we always award pay rises – when you don't) and look at how you can stand out from the crowd as an 'employer of choice' to help attract and retain talent."

Lisa Seagroatt, Healthy Workplace Culture Specialist

For companies truly committed to improving their workplace culture, it starts with transparent, honest communication right from the recruitment phase. This not only helps in setting clear expectations but also in building trust - a foundation for any healthy working relationship. If businesses continue to turn a blind eye to these signals, they risk losing out on a vast talent pool that prioritises wellbeing, clarity and growth.

Creating a positive workplace culture

Our survey revealed that **25% of respondents have not experienced a toxic workplace culture.** Although the majority of employees have experienced a toxic culture, it is still a testament to the efforts many organisations have put into fostering a positive and inclusive environment.
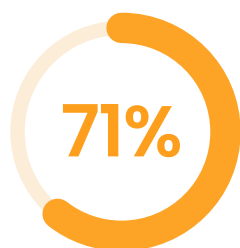
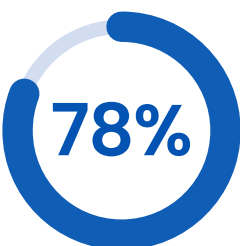**Key findings (those who have not experienced a toxic workplace culture)**

73%

73% of employees agree that they feel a sense of belonging to their organisation and its values.

67%
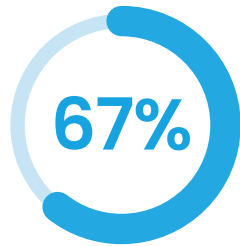
67% of employees agree that their leaders and managers are transparent when they communicate.

71%

71% of employees agreed that they feel appreciated and recognised for the work they do.

78%

78% said they were likely to stay in their role for the foreseeable future

The comfort level of employees in providing honest feedback stands out. With 95% feeling safe to offer candid feedback, it implies a shift in power dynamics towards a more flattened, transparent organisational structure where employees' voices are not only heard but actively encouraged.

We asked respondents, **how safe would you feel, if at all, in giving honest feedback in your workplace?**
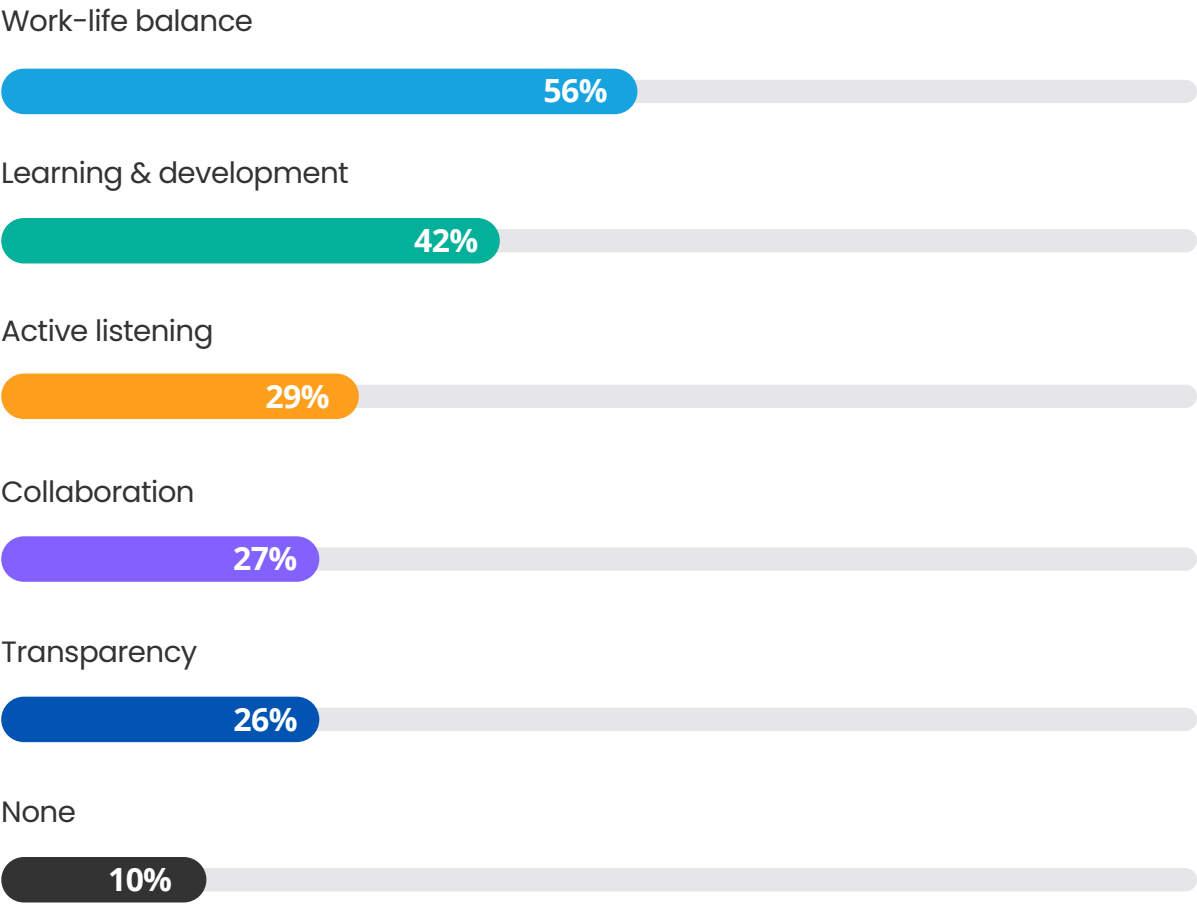
Safe

95%

Not safe

5%

The data around what employees value in their organisation's culture is particularly enlightening. Work-life balance topping the list at 56% underscores the ongoing shift in priorities of the modern workforce. Employees are no longer willing to sacrifice personal well-being for professional gain and organisations that recognise this are better positioned to attract and retain talent.

We asked employees, **what qualities, if any, does your organisation's culture prioritise?**

Work-life balance

56%

Learning & development

42%

Active listening

29%

Collaboration

27%

Transparency
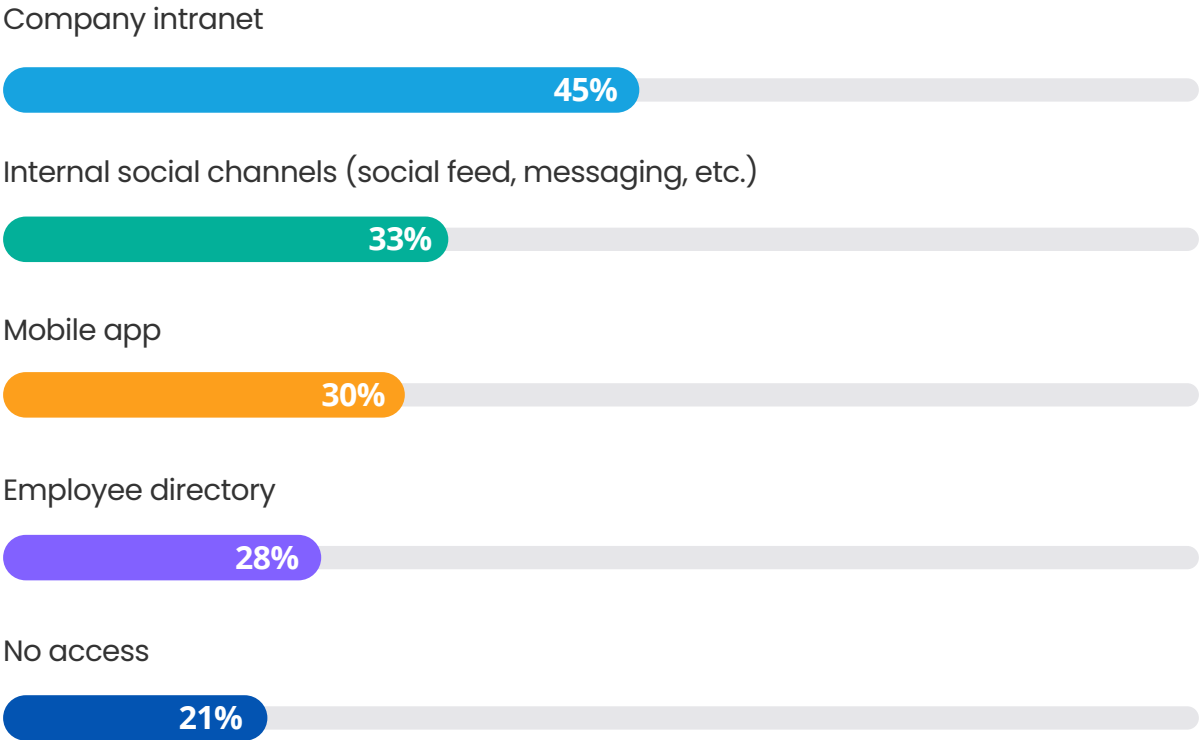
26%

None

10%

It's significant to note that **69% of employees believe that the communication channels and technology they use in their organisation play a vital role in contributing to a positive culture.** It validates the idea that effective communication is not merely about transmitting messages, but about fostering understanding, building community and reinforcing organisational values.

The survey shows that **45% of employees who have not experienced a toxic workplace culture have access to a company intranet,** highlighting their significant role in fostering a positive workplace culture. Intranets like Oak Engage, serve as centralised hubs for company information, news and resources. Their presence correlates with positive workplace culture, likely because they foster transparency, provide clarity and promote a sense of community. Having a single source of information can reduce ambiguities, provide a platform for recognising employee achievements and be an avenue for leadership to communicate transparently.
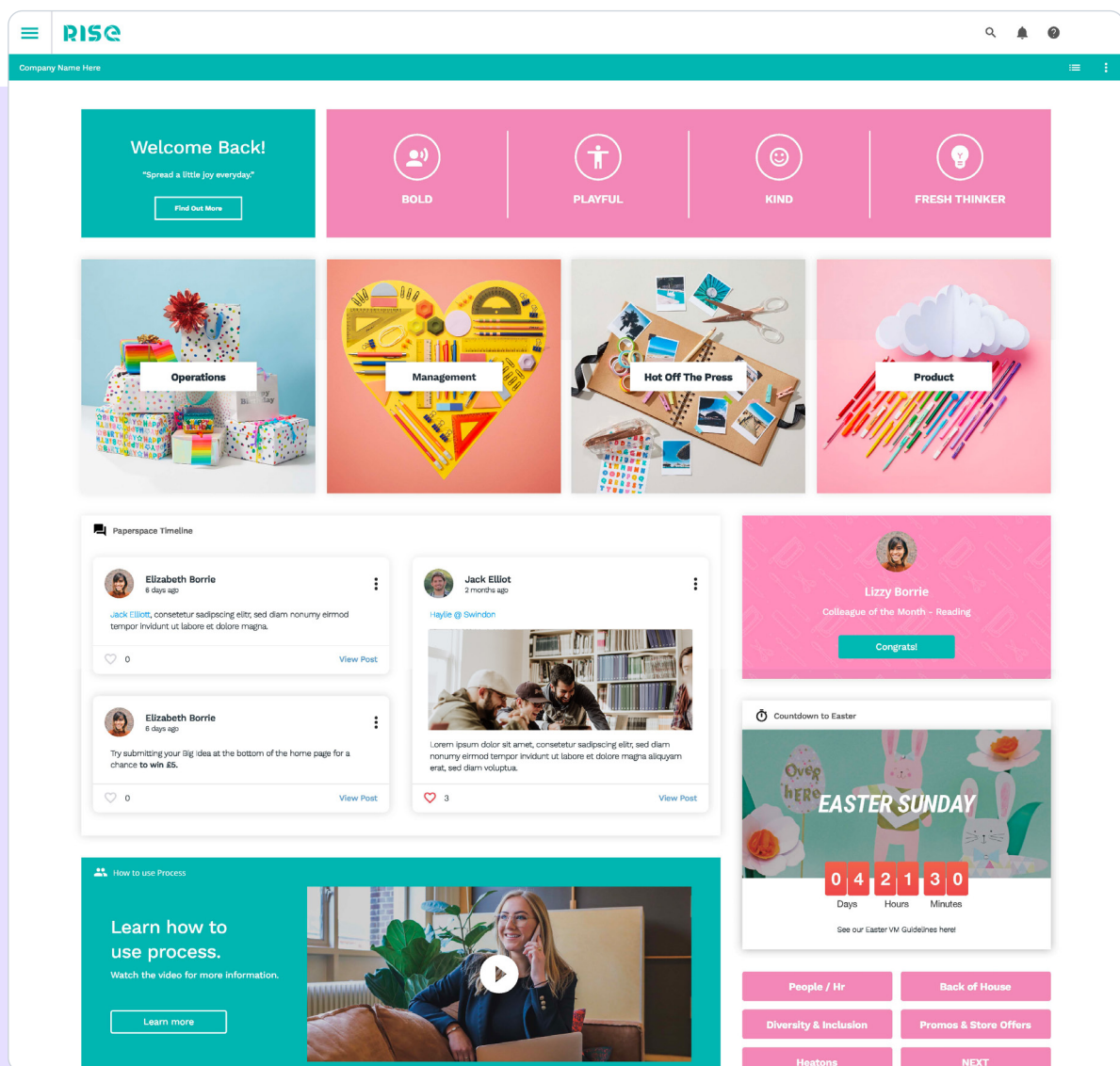
However, it's worth pointing out the **21% of employees report having no access to any workplace systems or technology.** Organisations should be addressing this as they may be missing out on the benefits of a well-connected, informed and engaged workforce.

We asked employees, **what workplace systems/technology, if any, do you have access to?**

Company intranet

45%

Internal social channels (social feed, messaging, etc.)

33%

Mobile app

30%

Employee directory

28%

No access

21%

How can organisations create a safe and respectful work environment?

"As people are your most valuable asset in any business, an open, transparent and fair culture (led from the top who sets the 'tone' for the culture) will help to create a safe and respectful working environment. Training around key policies (i.e., dignity and respect in the workplace) is critical in terms of how we interact with others (particularly when it comes to the sometimes-thorny issue of workplace 'banter' as it's not always welcomed by others!)."

Lisa Seagroatt, Healthy Workplace Culture Specialist

"This is all about your culture. What is your culture? What does it feel like to work in your organisation? What can I expect from my employee experience? What does safe and respectful mean to us here? Get people to share what they expect and create alignment through the organisation."

"We talk a lot about alignment and expectation management with the employee experience and this is why. Look at the employee lifecycle and then consider, for each stage, the relationships, the tools and processes and the environment. Do this from the perspective of the organisation and the employee to get a full perspective on what needs to change."

Jenni Field, Business Communications Expert & Author

Creating a healthy workplace culture with Lisa Seagroatt

"Culture in any organisation is led from the top. Leadership 'sets the tone' no matter whether it's a large corporate business or a small local childcare facility. Keeping sight of the fact that people are your most valuable asset and focusing on creating an open and transparent culture would be a key recommendation from me as this framework will provide you with the building blocks to create a healthy workplace culture."

"Other things I'd recommend include sharing your mission and values from the top down/bottom up to encourage 'ownership of the role' at every level as every single employee plays a vital role in achieving your business objectives, don't they?"

"This for me is a 'must do' when it comes to creating a healthy workplace culture alongside other things such as the bare minimum of ensuring that you provide regular opportunities for supervision and appraisal, coupled with rewarding (doesn't have to be financial) your people – just saying 'thank you' for a 'job well done' goes such a long way towards creating a healthy workplace culture in my book! When you can, please involve your people in shaping the business including decision making and keep them informed about anything they need to know about."

"Ignoring your employees creates a culture of fear so be bold, be brave – nobody said leadership was easy, so you have to take the rough with the smooth so keep your people informed and they will support you!"

Lisa Seagroatt, Healthy Workplace Culture Specialist

Our recommendations

Clear communication with your people

Open communication is crucial in creating a healthy workplace culture and the findings from our research reinforce this perspective. Employers need to communicate consistently and openly with their people. 'It starts from the top' cannot be stressed enough. Worryingly, employees said leaders were to blame for toxic workplace cultures, but leadership plays a pivotal role in setting the tone for organisational culture. When leaders prioritise open dialogue, it creates an atmosphere where employees feel valued and heard. This leads to improved morale, increased engagement and a greater sense of loyalty.

The role of communicators in this process is crucial. While leaders set the vision, communicators have the tools, expertise and insights to shape this vision into messages that resonate. They can guide leaders on the nuances of effective communication, ensuring that the intended messages are not just transmitted, but understood and internalised.

> **"Communication is crucial and needs to be open and transparent** to build a trusting culture where people can ask questions, share ideas, speak up, call out toxic behaviours and have confidence they will be listened to and action will be taken. It's always complex but we are all human and building the cultures where people are psychologically safe has to be at the heart of fixing these cultures."

Katie Marlow, Business Communication Consultant & Internal Communication Specialist

While open communication creates a strong foundation, consistency in this communication cements its effectiveness. Periodic updates or interactions may not suffice. Regular touchpoints, feedback loops and avenues for open dialogue ensure that the lines of communication remain active, fostering a culture of trust and mutual respect.

Transparency doesn't just mean sharing the good news but also the challenges. This "warts and all" approach builds trust, ensures that the workforce is well-informed and strengthens the bond between leadership and employees. As businesses evolve, leaders must continually ensure that communication remains at the forefront of their organisational strategy.

Promote equality and diversity

Alarmingly, discrimination is prevalent in the workplace, with employees reporting incidents based on:

- Age (24%)

- Gender (21%)

- Race (including colour, nationality, ethnicity or national origin) (14%)

- Pregnancy or maternity leave (11%)

- Disability (10%)

- Sexuality (9%)

- Religion or beliefs (8%)

- Being married or in a civil partnership (5%)

- Gender reassignment (5%)

> "Diversity and inclusion can bring in far more benefits for an organisation than one can imagine. Embracing inclusivity helps create a safe space for employees and brings in talent from diverse backgrounds with different perspectives, experiences and skills. This culture of diversity and inclusion can lead to enhanced creativity, innovation, and problem-solving within the organisation."

Smriti Joshi, Lead Psychologist at Wysa

It's essential to understand that promoting equality and diversity isn't merely about ticking a box or fulfilling a corporate social responsibility. It's an investment in the future, a commitment to nurturing an environment where every employee, irrespective of their background or personal circumstances, feels valued, understood and empowered.

As businesses look ahead, integrating genuine equality and diversity initiatives should be at the forefront. Organisations should aim not only to counteract discrimination but also to proactively foster an environment where diversity is celebrated and inclusivity is the norm.

We've created a diversity and inclusion guide to help businesses promote it within their workplace.

Here are just a few ways you can start:

Remove bias from hiring processes

Include women in your hiring processes to increase the representation of women and remove bias in your hiring decisions. You could also consider removing information on candidates gender, race and ethnicity hidden before the interview processes to remove any biases in the hiring process.

Train supervisors and managers

Any supervisor or manager who has an input regarding employees pay should be aware of any unconscious bias and legal information that can impact decision making. Decisions should only be made based on job related factors, rather than things like gender, race and ethnicity.

Increase diversity at senior levels

Increase representation within your business. Place women in leadership positions and ensure that all important meetings include 30-50% women and minorities. Studies found that women in businesses are better compensated when meetings include women and that there is a substantial gap in compensation when meetings do not include women.

Pay reviews

Promote pay equity by reviewing salaries to ensure that employees are being fairly compensated for their efforts, depending on their achievements and output and not on potential biases such as gender, race and religion.

Acknowledge holidays of all cultures

Why not create a collaborative holiday for your workforce where employees can add their own cultural holidays. Consider offering a floating holiday policy which gives each employee the chance to use their holidays when they wish to celebrate special times in their own calendar, rather than marking out set holidays in employees calendars.

Flexible working hours

According to the survey, a negative workplace culture hinders:
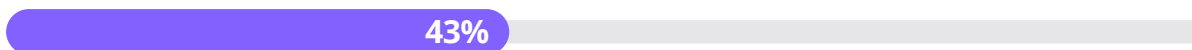
Employee retention
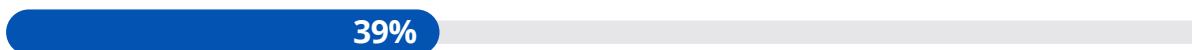
67%

Overall happiness of employees

63%

Productivity

54%

Employee attendance

43%

Collaboration

39%

Employees should be able to design their own working patterns based on what works best for them. Flexible working arrangements that give workers more choice and control over their workplace are likely to have a positive impact on people's wellbeing and mental health. It may also increase organisational level performance. However, flexible working is not without its challenges and can have drawbacks when the lines between work and one's personal life become blurred.

"When people are struggling, languishing or experiencing mental health concerns, mental health professionals recommend they slow down and pace their day based on their energy levels and needs and only prioritise what is necessary. Not being able to "own" their schedules or not having the provision of flexible schedules from their workplace can add to more stress and exacerbate their challenges."

"This can result in increased absenteeism, or even worse, presenteeism, where employees are physically present but mentally disengaged. In this scenario employees can feel "forced" to come into work even when they are already struggling, leading to poor focus, low productivity and impacting their self confidence. This presents a high risk of their mental wellbeing worsening or even reaching a point of crisis."

Smriti Joshi, Lead Psychologist at Wysa

Safe channels for reporting and regular feedback

95% of employees who haven't experienced a toxic workplace culture said they felt safe in giving honest feedback in their workplace. However, this is not the case in toxic workplaces, with **71% of employees admitting they are likely to work from home just to avoid toxic office cultures and 61% even resigned from a job due to workplace culture issues.** This makes it clear that leaders and communicators need to be doing more to make sure this avoidance doesn't happen.
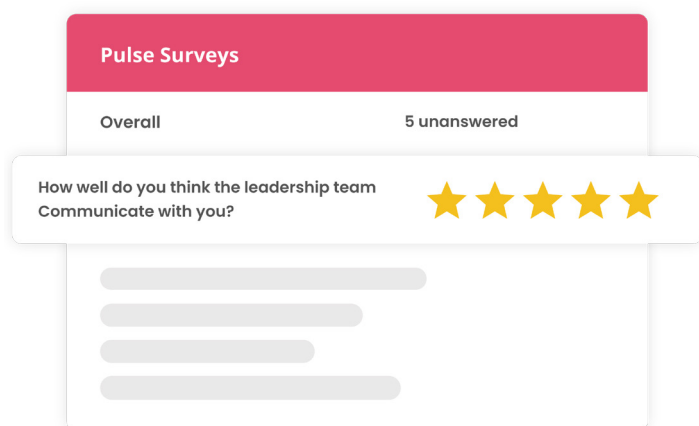
Employees need to feel safe to report any issues related to toxic workplace behaviours. This will build trust within your organisation amongst employees and allow any grievances to be aired so you can address them before they escalate. If you have real-time analytics attached to surveys you can also make informed decisions, showing you value employee input.
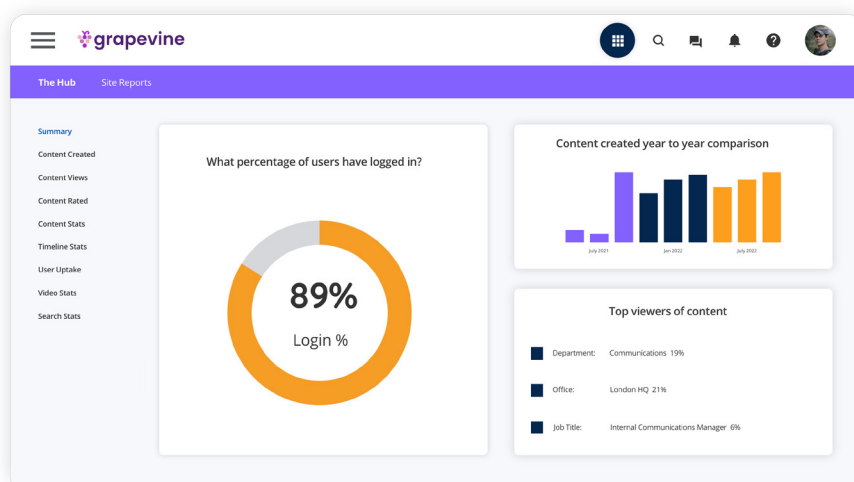
"It's so important for employees to have their say, provide feedback and raise any issues they may have. This gives a sense of belonging and increases employee engagement with two-way communication, fostering an inclusive work environment and makes your people feel valued, appreciated and heard. Oak allows you to conduct regular surveys and polls which enables you to capture real-time feedback from employees."

Will Murray, CEO at Oak Engage

"Provide spaces for employees to have a voice where they can be anonymous in their concerns or someone they can talk to such as peer-to-peer with a representative or depending on how open your organisation is, a leadership member."

Becky Turner, Workplace Psychologist at Claremont

"Organisations can also help their employees by giving them access to mental health tools that offer a safe outlet to voice their concerns and teach effective coping mechanisms. Utilising analytics to gauge the emotional wellbeing of employees can also inform policy decisions."

Smriti Joshi, Lead Psychologist at Wysa

Employee training

The survey revealed that **81% of employees agreed that businesses with toxic workplace cultures have leaders or managers who lack empathy.**

Empathy, often undervalued or misconstrued as a soft skill is actually pivotal in shaping the dynamics of a workplace. Leaders who demonstrate genuine empathy can better understand the emotions, perspectives and concerns of their employees. This understanding often translates into higher employee morale, greater trust in leadership and improved team collaboration.

The absence of empathy in leadership can lead to a disconnect between management and staff, resulting in feelings of being undervalued or misunderstood. This often leads to decreased productivity, increased turnover and an overall decline in workplace satisfaction. It's important to recognise that empathy is not an innate trait in everyone. Some leaders may excel in strategic thinking or operational efficiency but may not naturally possess an empathetic outlook. This is where the emphasis on employee training becomes so important.

"Not everyone has people management experience or skills and sometimes even the kindest people may not be able to express empathy while communicating, especially during a conflicting situation at work. By providing regular training focused on understanding and empathy can be transformative. Tailoring this training to meet the specific needs and challenges of your organisation, while keeping diversity in your organisational workforce, can help create a more compassionate, respectful and inclusive workplace where employees feel valued and supported."

Smriti Joshi, Lead Psychologist at Wysa

Organisations should invest in comprehensive training programs that focus not only on technical or functional expertise but also on developing soft skills such as empathy. Through workshops, role-playing, real-world case studies and ongoing mentorship, leaders can be equipped with the tools to practise and internalise empathy in their daily interactions.

"I've always embraced people. I've always found myself dealing with conflict so it's been normal for me to deal with very tricky situations. I always tried to ensure that you allow both sides to have their own say, you're going to have conflict because people are different. So in a people manager position, I think it's really important to give them training. For me, it came naturally. I was fortunate, but not everybody is in that space when they're managing people."

"It's great to promote people or 'grow your own' talent – I absolutely love that but we are not so good at considering whether someone who might be good at managing a project is really cut out to take on a team of 20 once they are promoted! I made the point previously that not everyone is suited to leadership roles so robust recruitment and selection into any role of leadership is critical; 81% of people surveyed confirmed that leaders and managers 'lacked empathy'; this is often due to the fact that people in these roles are either not 'cut out' for leadership or may just need some mentoring to help them transition into managers of people."

Lisa Seagroatt, Healthy Workplace Culture Specialist

Supportive leadership

As it has been mentioned throughout this report, leadership plays a crucial role in setting the tone of the workplace. Communicators should encourage leaders to lead with empathy and show a genuine interest in the wellbeing of their employees.

> **"The commitment of senior leaders in any organisation is crucial for the success of any mental wellbeing initiatives and training programs.** When leaders champion the cause, actively participate and openly discuss their own experiences and challenges they faced during their journey, it resonates with employees. Such leadership encourages active participation and uptake of these initiatives and training sessions. It helps employees feel motivated to engage and contribute, maintaining a safe, cohesive, inclusive and empathetic culture at work."

Smriti Joshi, Lead Psychologist at Wysa

Communicators should also advise and educate leaders on what is happening. It's really important for them to understand why we're doing what we're doing. Make sure your leaders are equipped with everything they need when communicating with your people so they can support them fully and make sure they set expectations about failure, mistakes and uncertainty. By modelling how to be genuine, straightforward and transparent, employees will eventually understand the culture of the organisation. During times of organisational difficulties, leaders inform their employees to show that they value their understanding.

This needs to come across in the language used.

Values need to be aligned to the culture of the company and it's the role of the communicator to keep an eye out. Keep reminding leaders whether this is aligned with your values. Use your role as a storyteller to drive awareness around what your values mean. You have the ability to take what's currently going on in the company and tell the story through the lens of what matters most, making that narrative more meaningful as a result. We've created a practical guide with tips on how to engage your staff through internal storytelling.

Invest in technology

The survey shows that of those that have not experienced a toxic workplace culture, **69% of employees agree that the communication channels and technology they use in their organisation contributes to a positive culture.** This shows that businesses need to start embracing technology in order to connect with their people, especially in the age of remote and hybrid working environments.

"Our research aims to shine a light on the detrimental impact of toxic workplace culture on the mental and physical wellbeing of employees. The statistics are alarming, highlighting the clear need for businesses to create healthier working environments for their people."

"With 69% of employees affirming that their organisation's communication channels and technology contribute positively to their work culture, it's critical that these resources are utilised more effectively. Products like Oak Engage's intranet can promote open dialogue, celebrate achievements and encourage a sense of belonging amongst employees."

"But we need to remember that technology alone isn't the solution. It needs to be backed by strong, empathetic leadership and a genuine commitment to prioritising employee wellbeing."

Will Murray, CEO at Oak Engage

Aria

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Generating your content

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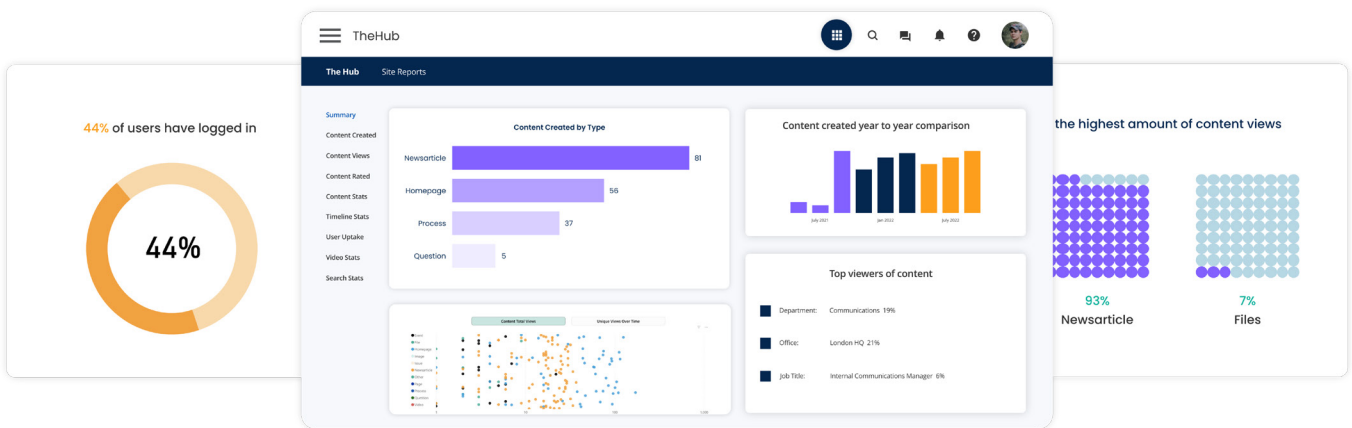
What we do

Oak Engage is an award-winning employee engagement and intranet solution. Using AI, we empower you to get the right message, to the right people, at the right time.

Our mission

We're here to make communication simple. We believe there is a better way to engage employees, cut through the noise and inspire action that puts people at the heart of organisations.

We offer a solution that takes away the stress. We believe intranets should be working a whole lot harder for businesses. We empower you to be more strategic in your approach and allow you to focus your already limited resources on the things that truly matter.

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