



Mental health at the crossroads

A pulse survey on the effects of the Covid-19 crisis on the mental health of technology workers, June 2020

**Harvey
Nash.**

Mental health at the crossroads



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Recognition of just how widespread mental health challenges have become in our complex modern world has grown significantly in recent years. Many people will experience mental illness or acute depression at some point in their lives. There has been a welcome growth in willingness to talk about it.

At Harvey Nash, we explored the issue as part of our Technology Survey last year – and the results were something of a wake-up call: half of tech professionals admitted that they were or had in the past been concerned about their mental health due to work pressures.

And this was before anyone had even heard of Covid-19...

With the coronavirus pandemic creating extraordinary impacts on personal and professional lives, we felt it was important to gauge the impact of the crisis on the mental wellbeing of the sector. We ran a pulse survey of tech professionals – giving us a pool of responses across our two surveys of some 1,600 people.

The results give cause for concern – the mental health of a significant proportion of professionals has deteriorated during the crisis. The way that, collectively, we respond to and provide support around this could prove pivotal for the future.

In many ways, we now stand at a crossroads.



Key Findings – mental wellbeing impaired by virus fallout

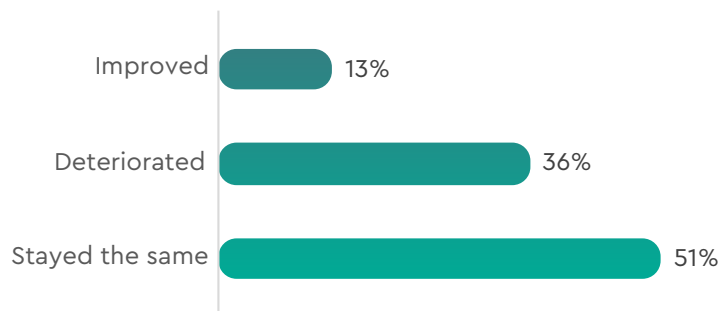


Figure 1: Has your mental health improved or deteriorated as a result of the Covid-19 crisis?

Our pulse survey, launched during Mental Health Awareness Week in May 2020 after two months of lockdown and with an easing of restrictions beginning to be introduced (bringing the prospect of a physical return to work much nearer), found that:

- **Over a third** of tech professionals (36%) have seen their **mental health deteriorate** as a result of the crisis
- **Over a quarter** (27%) are **concerned about their mental health right now** due to working pressures – before the crisis it was less than one in six (16%)
- **In total, 60%** of tech professionals either are or have been **concerned about their mental health** – a 16% increase compared to before the pandemic. In absolute terms, based on ONS figures, this is rise of almost 200,000
- **For over a third (35%)** of those people actively concerned now about their mental health, it is the **first ever time in their lives that they have experienced this**
- **For one in ten**, the stress they are experiencing is **negatively impacting on their work** – with this problem being twice as prevalent amongst permanent staff as contractors
- Those in Project Management (28%), Programme Management (26%) or IT Operations (26%) roles – **who were under most strain to rapidly move large workforces into remote/virtual environments - are most affected right now**. Prior to the crisis, 1 in 5 workers* in IT Operations were concerned about their mental health, but this has risen to around 1 in 3

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*The 1 in 5 in IT Operations concerned about their mental health reported this in the last quarter of 2019 – prior to the first case of Coronavirus in China.

Causes – release valves cut off, worries about the future



Figure 2: The causes of stress over the last eight weeks (respondents selected top 3)

In many ways, the causes of mental pressure during the pandemic are obvious: there is less time to switch off given that leisure activities like going to the gym or out for a meal have not been possible (46%), worries about job security are prevalent (41%), while 'always on' technology means people find it harder to escape the pressures of work when they are stuck at home (33%).

The survey also revealed the stark and tragic reality of Covid-19 for some – with several respondents sharing that a loved one such as a mother or father had died. Others were worried about elderly parents or relatives, or struggling with separation from a partner.

Digging beneath the surface, there are some revealing variations depending on an individual's circumstances:

- Job worries are affecting contractors (55%) significantly more than permanent staff (32%)
- Those with children face particular stresses, given the need for home-schooling as well as work – for 32% of those with children, caring for/home-schooling their children is a main cause of their stress
- 'Always on' technology is also a bigger issue for those with children – cited by 33% compared to just 13% of those who live alone
- For those who live alone, the main challenge is quite different – having no one to speak to (74%)
- Work realities continue of course – and over a quarter (28%) say their primary cause of stress is a complex project, while a sixth (15%) say the executive team is setting unrealistic deadlines
- Meanwhile, it should be noted that some respondents say their mental wellbeing has actually improved – 20% amongst furloughed staff compared to 14% of those who have had to carry on working

“Our CEO expects everyone to work long days every day as they are at home...”

Coping strategies – what works for you?

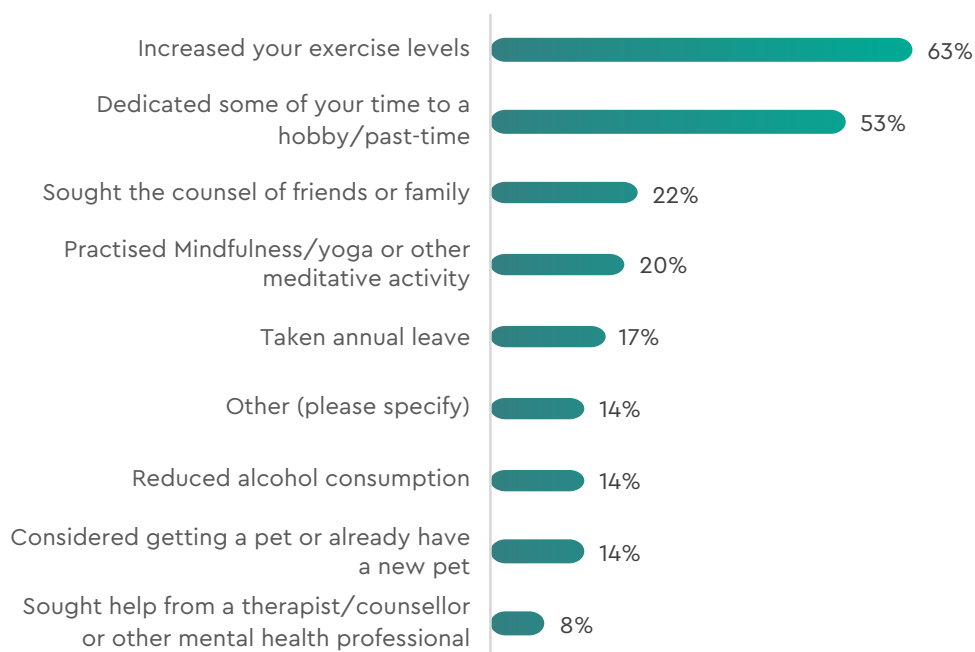


Figure 3: Ways people are improving their mental health (respondents selected all that applied)

Everyone is different – and people have found a wide range of coping strategies to help them navigate the strange and unfamiliar times.

Increasing exercise levels has been the single biggest tactic (63%), followed by practising or taking up a hobby (53%). Here again though we see some interesting variations, with those with children being more likely to exercise more (75%), while for those living alone hobbies have been more in vogue (58%). Staff on furlough have been significantly more likely to do both than those still working.

A significant minority of respondents have practised mindfulness or yoga or similar (20%), sought the counsel of friends or family (22%), or taken annual leave (17%). Less than one in ten (8%) have sought help from a therapist or counsellor.

Meanwhile, a less positive trend has also emerged: alcohol. A quarter of tech professionals have increased their consumption. This rises to 28% of those living alone.

“I have spent the lockdown period learning new skills”

Lockdown easing – increasing the stress for many

We are now entering a new phase, with lockdown easing and more aspects of life beginning to move towards something more like normality. But while instinctively one might expect this to reduce the mental strain on people, for a significant proportion this easing is in fact ushering in a whole new phase of worry.

A quarter (26%) say their stress levels have increased since lockdown restrictions began to be relaxed. Permanent staff – who are more likely to need to return to offices – are more concerned (31%) than contractors (22%), and those with children (32%) are more worried than those living alone (21%).

The top three concerns are:

- Over a quarter (27%) are worried about bringing Covid-19 back into the home
- Almost a fifth (16%) are concerned about the health risks of the daily commute
- Almost a sixth (15%) are concerned about increasing the risk of passing Covid-19 on to wider family members


Support – gaps in the system?

Clearly, at any time – and especially now during the Covid-19 crisis and its long term effects – support mechanisms from employers to help and look after their staff are critically important.


But although many companies (56%) have increased the level of personal support they provide, half of employers (50%) still don't provide formal support for mental health issues.

One in seven (14%) tech professionals describe the organisation they work for as unsupportive on mental health issues, and this rises to 20% of contractors. Half (50%) see their employer as very supportive, with formal support in place.

The difference this makes is visible: three quarters (75%) of those working for unsupportive companies are either concerned about their mental health now or in the past. This drops by a quarter (24%) amongst very supportive companies. Staff at unsupportive companies are more likely to have seen their mental health deteriorate during lockdown.



“Things have changed so much I would no longer like to return to an office environment”



Standing at the crossroads – where do we go from here?

In these challenging times for individuals and businesses, and with conditions likely to be difficult for months or even years ahead, there is a real risk that mental health could continue to deteriorate.

A worrying factor is that mental health support becomes harder to deliver in the more distributed workforce models that we have seen during the Covid-19 crisis so far and which are likely to continue into the future.

As Chris Seel, Director at Harvey Nash Group, observes: "With less face-to-face contact, it is harder for managers to pick up on signs that someone is struggling. Individuals are less likely to reach out for support if that first, immensely difficult conversation needs to be by phone or video call. Mental health support becomes much more difficult at the time when it is needed most.

"That is why now is the time for businesses to act and do everything they can to get the right support in place. Mental health support is not a one-time fix – it needs to be continually reviewed and refreshed. It needs to be high up the executive agenda and have senior backing."

You can watch Chris talk more about his own experience with mental wellness during a recent discussion hosted by Uhubs: <https://www.uhubs.co.uk/livestream-recording-chris-seel>

Taking the right path

Failure to respond to what is evolving in front of us now could lead to much bigger problems in the future.

With the right focus and commitment, we believe the tech sector can find the mechanisms to support staff and enable them to continue to bring the best of themselves to work.

This is the path that, collectively, the sector needs to take.

Tips for Improving Mental Wellbeing

Experts at This Can Happen have created some useful and practical guidance for both individuals and employers:



For Staff

1. **Step up to create an internal mental health network.** These work so much better when started from grassroots by people with passion.
2. **Establish new norms that encourage people to connect each day,** for example a daily positive message on a team WhatsApp group. Helping people connect can combat loneliness.
3. **Managers should invest extra time in calling people on the phone.** This both makes a social connection and lets you look for signs of anxiety. If you're not the type of manager who is "good" at connecting with people human to human, this is a great time to try.
4. **Help your colleagues maintain a routine and set appropriate boundaries** so "work" and "life" don't blur and create anxiety. The social cues you have in an office (that the lights are off and everyone has left) aren't there at home. There are several different ways to set a boundary. Individuals can nominate a buddy to remind them to step away from their desk to help with social connection.
5. **Create new ways of connecting socially,** for example a scheduled Pet Happy Hour where pet owners get online and introduce their pets.
6. **Encourage people to maintain health exercise habits,** for example holding a step challenge or having a group walk using phones + Zoom. A healthy exercise routine can combat anxiety.

For Employers

1. **Create an internal portal of free resources** so your staff know what is available for them to access both internally and externally. Supporting the mental health of your staff does not need to be expensive. For example webinars that are available at <https://www.thiscanhappenevents.com/resources/Webinars-and-1:1-Insight-Interviews>
2. **Invite staff to upload content themselves.** This may be in the form of blogs or information that they have found elsewhere. It is really helpful to enable staff to be responsible for content as well.
3. **Hold regular town halls where the main theme is mental health.** Have a senior leader run the session, inviting people to talk about their mental health. Don't worry if, at the start, these gatherings have low numbers. It will grow as people learn about it and feel more comfortable.
4. **At the senior level, communicate, communicate, communicate.** Uncertainty creates anxiety and right now employees may be uncertain about how long they'll be working away from the office and whether there are going to be impacts to the business and their job.
5. **Remember that mental health is not an 'initiative'.** It needs to be embedded in workplace culture and will not happen overnight. A small start is a good start.

About Harvey Nash

Shaping your tomorrow

We are global leaders in technology recruitment, delivering solutions that connect organisations with the very best talent – from software developers to business transformation leaders.

With over 30 years' experience and global reach, we have an unparalleled knowledge and capability in all areas of technology.

www.harveynash.com

Harvey Nash is part of Harvey Nash Group, a global professional services organisation with three key areas of focus: Technology recruitment, IT solutions and Leadership services.

We partner with clients, helping them unlock the power of individual and team talent.

www.harveynashgroup.com

About This Can Happen

This Can Happen is the largest gathering of companies across the world, coming together to tackle workplace mental health. We support employers and employees across the world to create a positive environment for good mental health in the workplace.

Everything we do is solutions-led. Building on our London conference our global online event (23–25 November) provides delegates with relevant answers to a range of mental health topics, our Awards celebrate excellence in mental health strategies and our networking events enable likeminded individuals to meet and learn with their peers.

www.thiscanhappenevents.com

