



The digital health dilemma:

Is technology keeping workers healthy or making them ill?

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Foreword

The world as we know it changed forever in early 2020 as the COVID-19 virus began spreading like wildfire around the globe. Among the many outcomes of the fast-spreading pandemic has been a profound shift in our day-to-day lives. For the first time, millions of people have begun working from home and accessing health care by virtual means. In addition, the mental and emotional impact of the “second curve” of the pandemic has sparked an upsurge in conversations about the need for more robust employee health and well-being support.

In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic marks an acceleration of trends that had already begun. However, we at Aetna International believe that businesses now have a once-in-a-generation opportunity before them. It would seem that employers have a workforce that is willing to think differently about where and how they work, and how they access care and manage their health and well-being. We know that the most effective business leaders and organisations are those that offer stability in times of crisis, challenge the status quo and look for opportunities to continually improve and move forward. So, organisations that thrive in the post-pandemic world will be those that fundamentally embrace compassion, humanity and trust alongside digital transformation

“ In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic marks an acceleration of trends that had already begun. ”

and innovation. Furthermore, employers that help ensure the health and well-being of their employees will help ensure the sustainability and longevity of their operations.

That’s a goal we continue to work toward at Aetna International, both internally and on behalf of our customers. As you read and reflect on this report, I hope you’ll consider what steps your organisation must take to be ready for what comes next.



Richard di Benedetto
President, Aetna International



Executive summary

It comes as no surprise that digital technology has transformed the way many businesses operate and support their employees. From the Internet of Things, communications platforms and collaboration software to smartphones, apps and virtual services, tech is an undeniably powerful force. But, when it comes to its impact on employees' health and well-being, is it a force for good or for evil — or a little bit of both? And what can employers do to leverage the positive influences and diminish the negative impact on workers?

In March 2020 — just as COVID-19 was reaching pandemic status — Aetna International conducted an international survey. While the survey's timing was sheer coincidence, its purpose was rooted in modern working culture and context. It was created in response to the global rise in employee stress and anxiety levels resulting from an “always-on” culture¹; growing corporate investment in digital health and well-being solutions²; and shifting workplace views on how best to help employees achieve a better work/life balance and health outcomes³. The study was designed to gauge

1 <https://www.covermagazine.co.uk/news/3074668/-culture-causing-workplace-mental-health-crisis>

2 <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/focus/human-capital-trends/2018/employee-well-being-programs.html>

3 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alankohll/2018/03/27/the-evolving-definition-of-work-life-balance/#6c90cfa99ed3>



workers' views on workplace technology and digital health services and their impact on employee health and well-being. The survey results, described in this report, offer a unique snapshot of a key moment in history.

Our survey polled 4,025 employees of mid- to large-sized businesses across the UK, the U.S., the UAE and Singapore. Respondents represented a range of ages, genders, job roles and employment statuses (e.g., business owner, full-time worker, part-time worker and self-employed/contract worker).

Our questions aimed to identify:

- What employees think organisations should do to harness the positive influences of workplace technology and digital health tech on their health and well-being and to help diminish the negatives.
- Where employees think organisations should focus their energy as they look to invest in innovative corporate wellness solutions and policies to help support better mental and physical health and well-being outcomes.

Terminology definitions

For the purpose of this survey, workplace technology encompasses things like collaboration and communication platforms, smartphones and the Internet of Things, while digital health and well-being tools and services include things like wellness apps, fitness trackers and virtual or remote access to primary health care or professional services.

The survey timing coincided with the rapid spread of the coronavirus —March being the month in which the WHO declared a global pandemic, sporting leagues around the world shut down and lockdowns began in many countries outside the Asia-Pacific region. (By comparison, Singapore raised its threat level to its second highest level of alert, orange, on 7 February.⁴)

While some of the opinions uncovered in this survey will have undoubtedly changed since March 2020, we believe our results offer a valid snapshot of workers' viewpoints at an important moment in time. We also believe these insights provide invaluable insights for business leaders who are currently re-evaluating their company culture, workplace policies and health and well-being strategies.

Why we undertook this research

At Aetna International, we believe in helping people on their path to better health. Because we know that organisations — large and small — recognise that their future growth and success depend on their people, we're committed to bringing our partners and customers insights on some of the biggest health and well-being challenges and forces shaping the corporate health landscape today. We're here to help organisations build a healthy, happy, productive workforce.

⁴ <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-covid-19-outbreak-evolved-coronavirus-deaths-timeline-12639444>

Chapter 1: The results

Workplace technology and digital health solutions — For good or ill?

Digital technology is an essential tool for enabling organisations to operate, innovate and grow, both locally and internationally. Digital platforms and services are also integral to the ways in which employers help support the health and well-being of their workforces at home and abroad. In this way, businesses help minimise the operational risks and costs associated with employee health care claims and help ensure their workforce thrives — personally and professionally.

In this chapter, we explore how workplace technology and digital tools and services can both promote health and detract from it. We also look at the impact of using technology to work from home and manage the subsequent effects.

Key digital health dilemmas

Overall, workers are simultaneously optimistic and cautious about digital technology and the effect it can have on their health and well-being. Consider these findings:

- 74% agree that technology enables them to manage time better, allowing time to exercise more, yet 70% agree that they would exercise more if they spent less time on their PCs
- 79% agree that technology enables them to manage time better, therefore reducing stress levels, yet 67% agree that checking their phones for work-related messages makes them more stressed
- 83% agree that technology enables them to work remotely and balance life and work, yet 66% agree that working from home blurs the lines between work and home life

What do the results show?

In the following sections, we reveal the ways in which technology and the digital world positively influences worker health, how it negatively impacts worker health and the mixed views on tech-enabled remote working as a means of achieving greater work/life balance.



On the positive side: Technology and digital innovation as a health promoter

Workers strongly agree that technology at work has the potential to improve physical and mental health.

Survey respondents have clearly bought into technology's ability to improve connectivity, collaboration and productivity and, as a result, worker health and well-being. **Nearly 90%** of workers say technology lets them complete simple tasks quickly, connect with co-workers across different locations and receive job support. **Almost eight in 10 (79%)** say technology lets them manage time better, thus reducing stress levels. And **59%** say technology helps them improve physical and mental health overall.

Employees clearly believe that technological innovation and digital tools and services could further help them to improve their health. One area of note is mental health. While **less than 30%** of respondents say they currently use video, text-based or telephonic solutions to help manage their mental health, **upwards of 44%** said that they might consider these options in future.

Key findings:

71% believe their employer could help them better manage their physical health through workplace technology

61%



believe their employer could help them better manage their mental health through workplace technology



80%

would be happy if their employer used their anonymised health data to improve health and wellness benefits across the business

Two thirds



say a company-provided smart watch or fitness tracker would help them manage both their physical health (**69%**) and their mental health (**66%**)

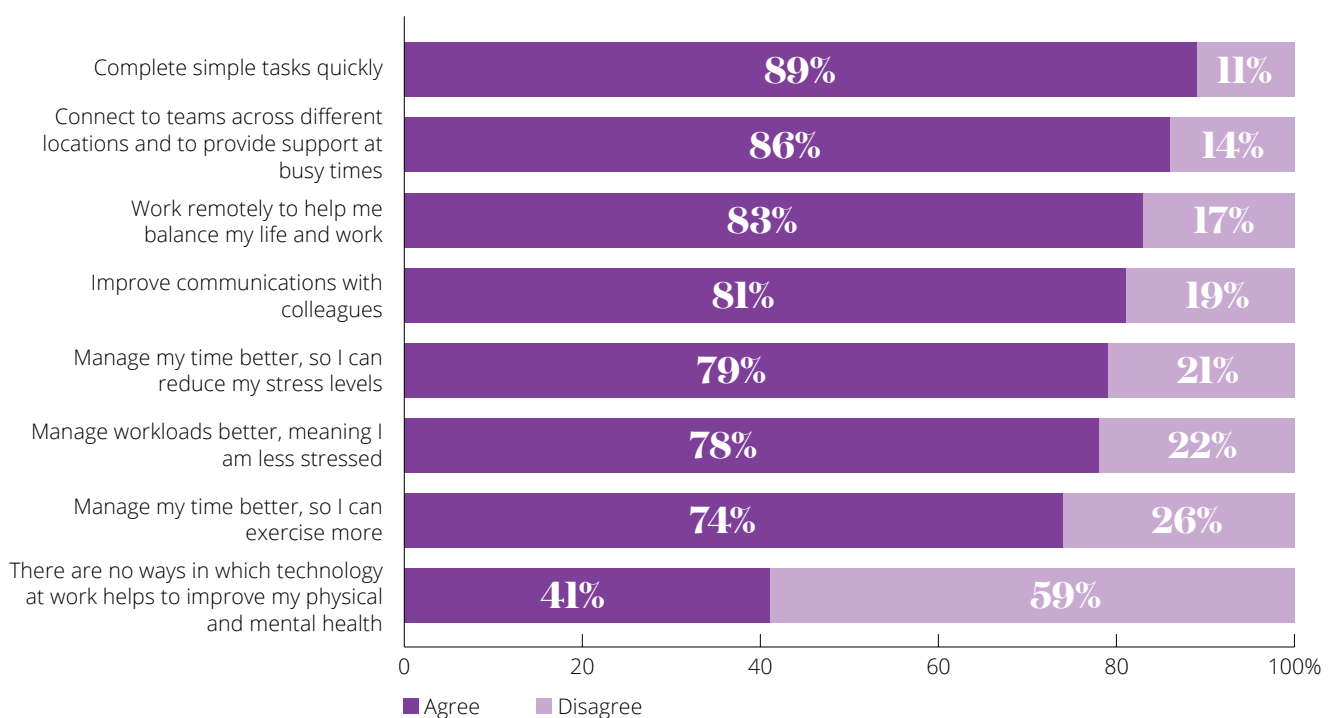
“ The mental health space is one that could benefit hugely from digital solutions. You remove a bit of that stigma, you provide easy access and convenience, you provide some level of anonymisation. And you can access care from your desk, from your house, when no one else needs to know you’re accessing it. ”

Dr Anushka Patchava

Proposition & Strategy Lead for vHealth (Global), Population Health Solutions, Aetna International

Chart 1: Improving productivity and mental and physical health

Technology at work (emails, cell phones, etc) improves my physical and mental health by enabling me to...

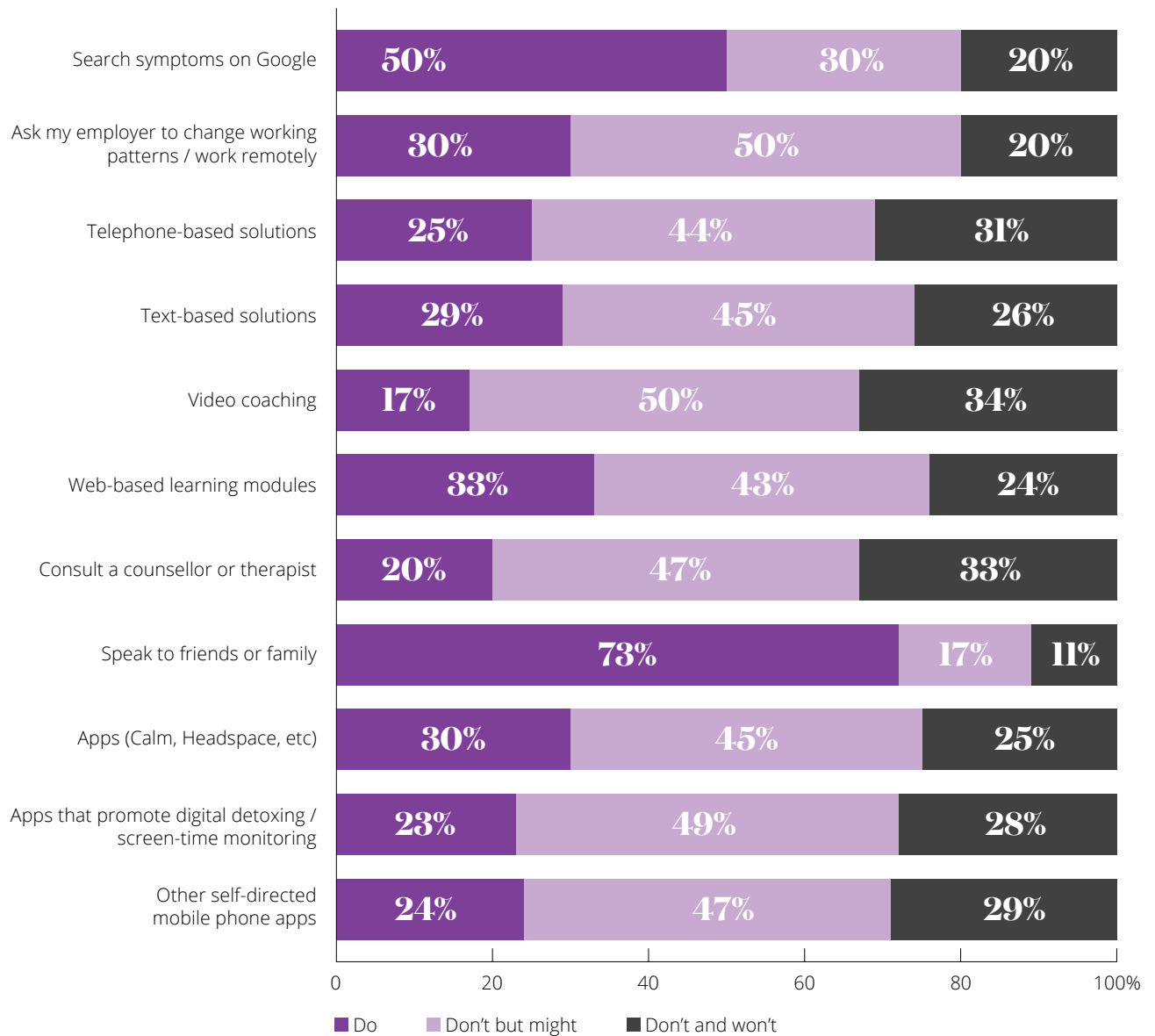


The share of workers who agree that...

- **89%:** Technology enables them to complete simple tasks quickly
- **86%:** Technology helps to connect teams across different locations and to provide support at busy times
- **83%:** Technology enables them to work remotely and balance life and work
- **81%:** Technology improves communication with colleagues
- **74%:** Technology enables them to manage time better, allowing time to exercise more
- **79%:** Technology enables them to manage time better, therefore reducing stress levels
- **78%:** Technology enables them to manage workloads better, therefore reducing stress levels
- **59%:** Technology helps them to improve physical and mental health in some way

Chart 2: Tech-enabled and digital solutions for mental health

Which of the following do you do to do help manage your mental health?

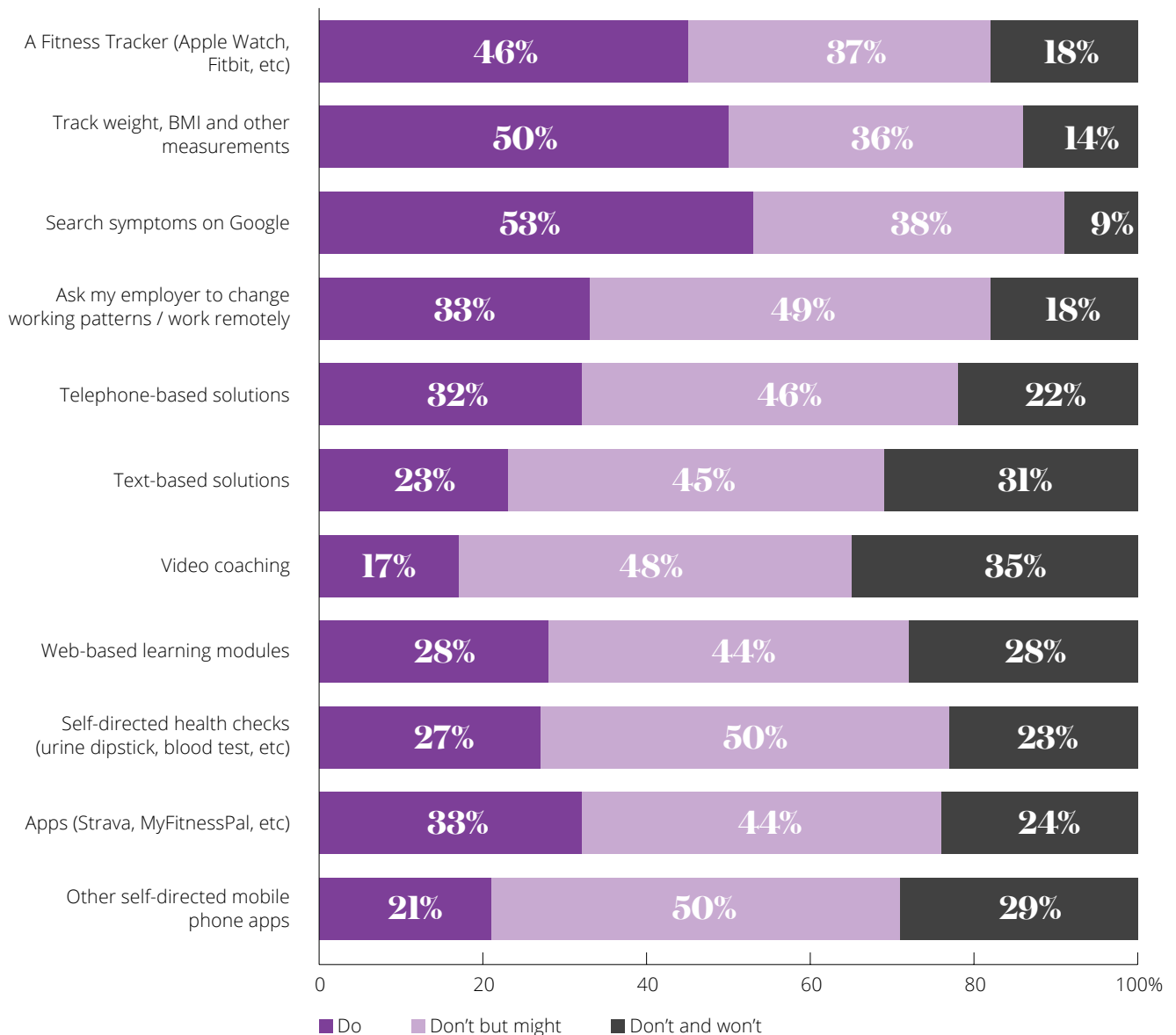


The share of workers who agree that they...

- **80%:** Currently use or would use Google to research mental health issues they may have
- **67%:** Currently consult or would consult a counsellor or therapist to help manage mental health
- **69%:** Currently use or would use a telephonic solution to help manage mental health
- **66%:** Currently use or would use video-based coaching to help manage mental health
- **80%:** Have asked or would ask their employer to change their working patterns or enable remote working to help improve their mental health

Chart 3: Tech-enabled and digital solutions for physical health

Which of the following do you do help manage your physical health?

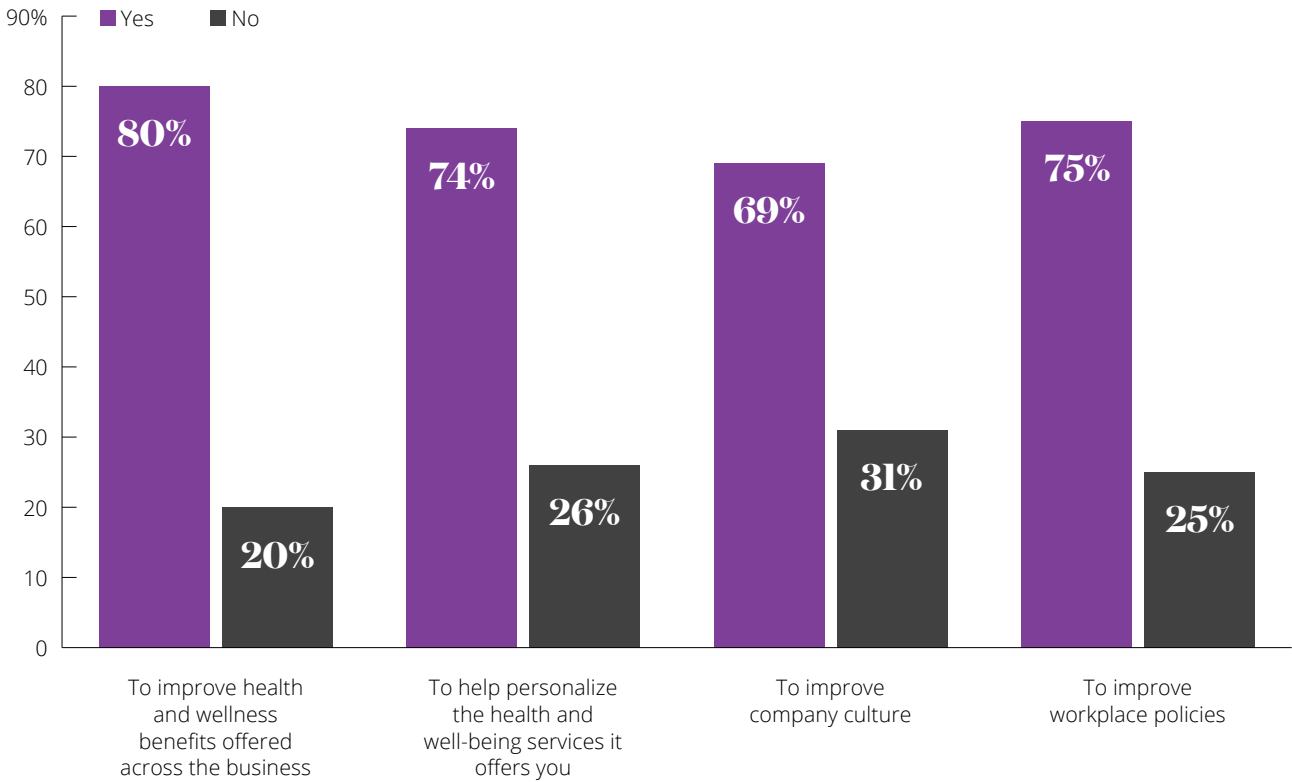


The share of workers who agree that they...

- **82%:** Currently use or would use a fitness tracker such as an Apple Watch or Fitbit
- **65%:** Currently use or would use video coaching to help manage physical health
- **77%:** Currently use or would use self-directed health checks (a DNA or blood test, for example) to help manage their physical health
- **76%:** Currently use or would use apps that provide physical health tips and tracking
- **86%:** Currently use or would use technology to keep track of weight, BMI or diet and calorie counts
- **82%:** Have asked or would ask their employer to change their working patterns or enable remote working to help improve their physical health

Chart 4: Anonymised health data used to inform company culture and corporate health well-being

Would you be happy for your employer to use your anonymised health data/profile if it was used for the following reasons?



The share of workers who agree that they would be happy for their data...

- **80%:** To be used to improve the health and wellness benefits offered across the business
- **74%:** To be used to help personalise the health and well-being services on offer
- **69%:** To be used to help improve company culture
- **75%:** To be used to help improve workplace policies





On the negative side: Technology as a health detractor

Workers recognise the downside of pervasive technology but have trouble setting their devices aside.

Many of the workers we surveyed recognise that workplace technology brings both advantages and disadvantages, sometimes in nearly equal proportions. For example, **65%** of respondents believe that being able to have a company mobile phone to handle work calls and emails remotely helps them better manage their mental health. Yet almost the same percentage (**64%**) worry that they use their phones too much. That's probably why **60%** try — but apparently fail — to check their phones less often.

A big concern is that digital technology contributes to an “always-on” mindset. **Seven in 10 (70%)** respondents admit to checking their phones first thing in the morning for work-related messages, whilst **nearly two-thirds** do the same thing right before going to bed.

Key findings:

61%

say that pressures to answer calls outside of work makes them more stressed



62%

say that pressures to respond to emails outside of work makes them more stressed



76%

believe curbs on out-of-hours use of work-related technology could help them better manage their physical health.



56%

say that reliance on and overuse of communication platforms and work-related emails increases their stress levels



Nearly

Two thirds

two-thirds of employees say that they would be worried if their employer used their personal health data as a criterion for promotion (**61%**) or as a means of establishing salary grade (**64%**)

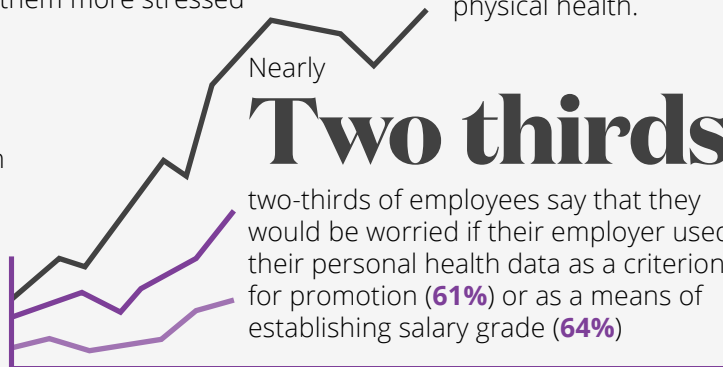
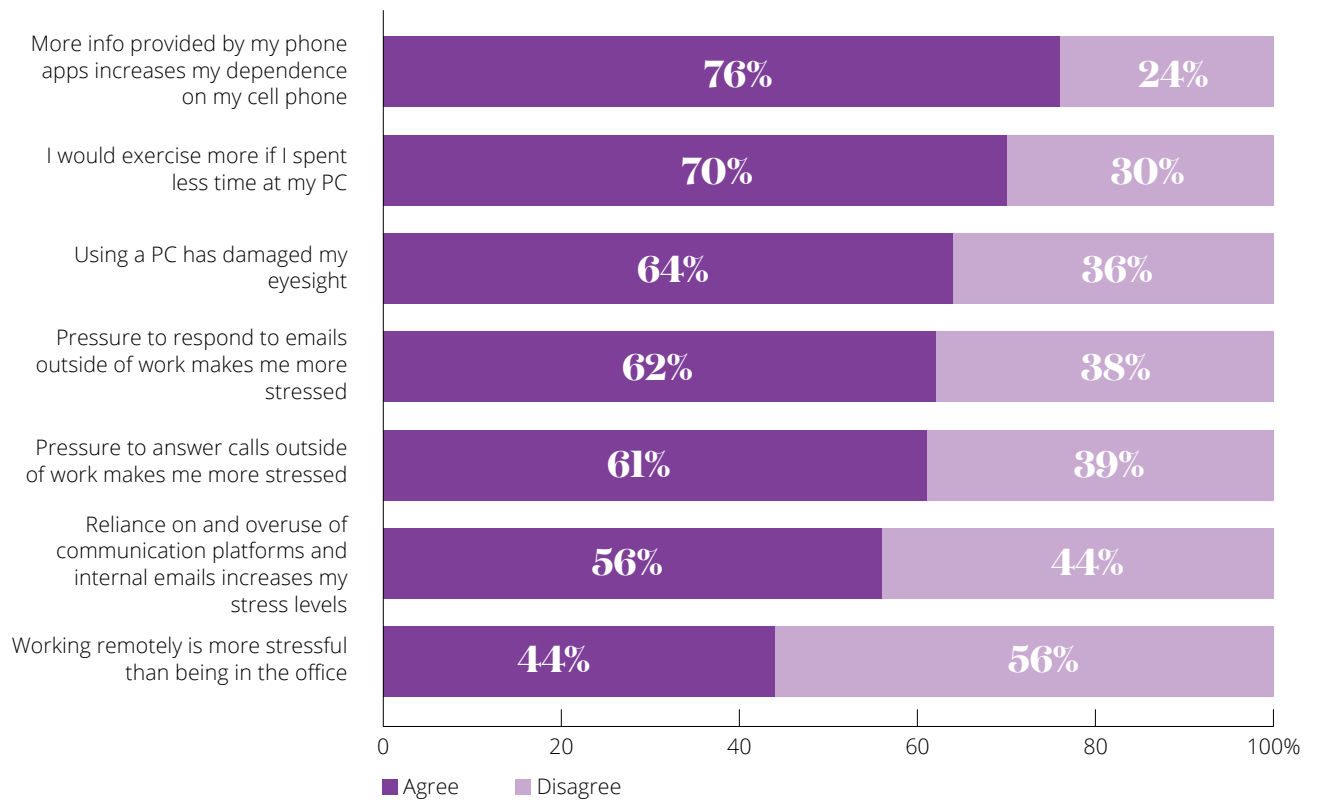


Chart 1: Health issues and workplace technology

How much do you agree with the following statements?

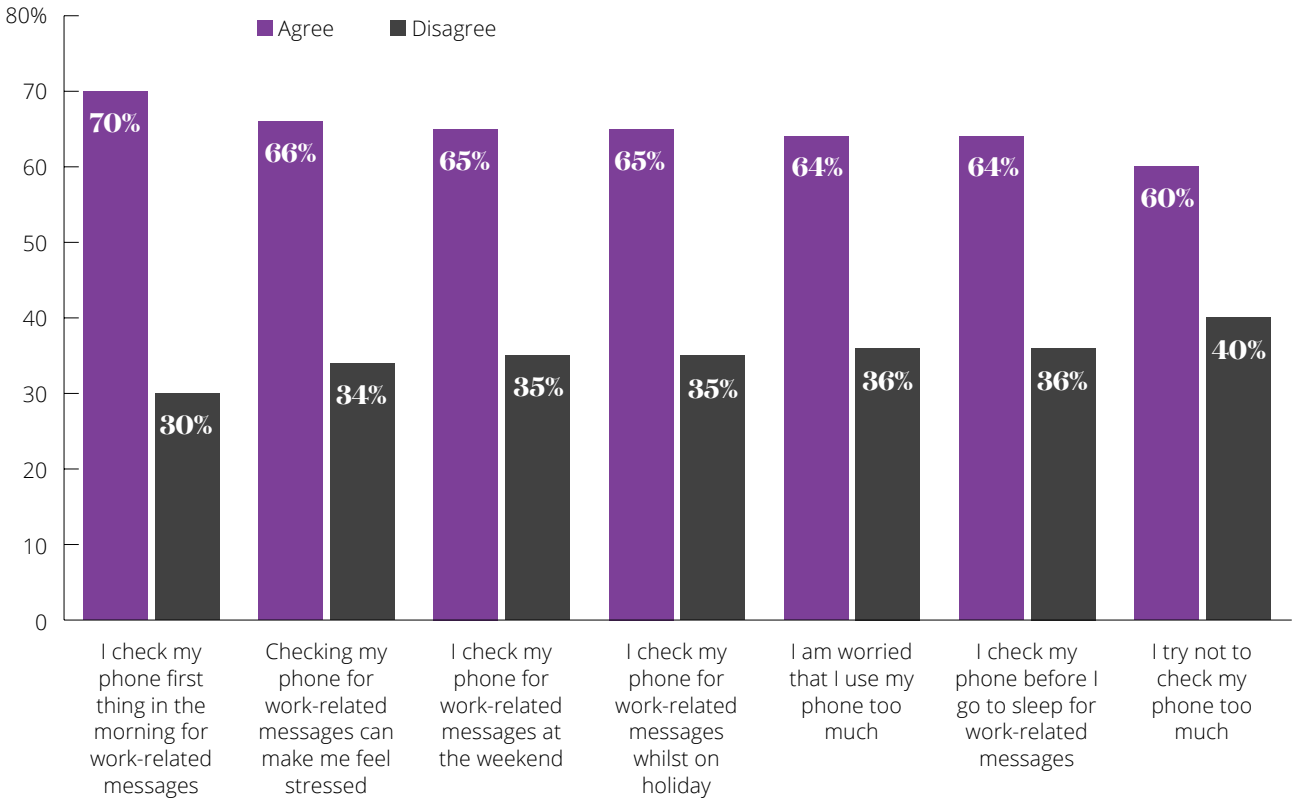


The share of workers who...

- **70%:** Agree that they would exercise more if they spent less time on their PCs
- **64%:** Agree that using a PC has damaged their eyesight
- **61%:** Agree that the pressure to answer calls outside of work increases stress
- **62%:** Agree that the pressure to answer emails outside of work increases stress
- **56%:** Agree that a reliance on and overuse of communication platforms increases stress

Chart 2: Overdependence on smartphones

Which of the following do you do to help manage your mental health?



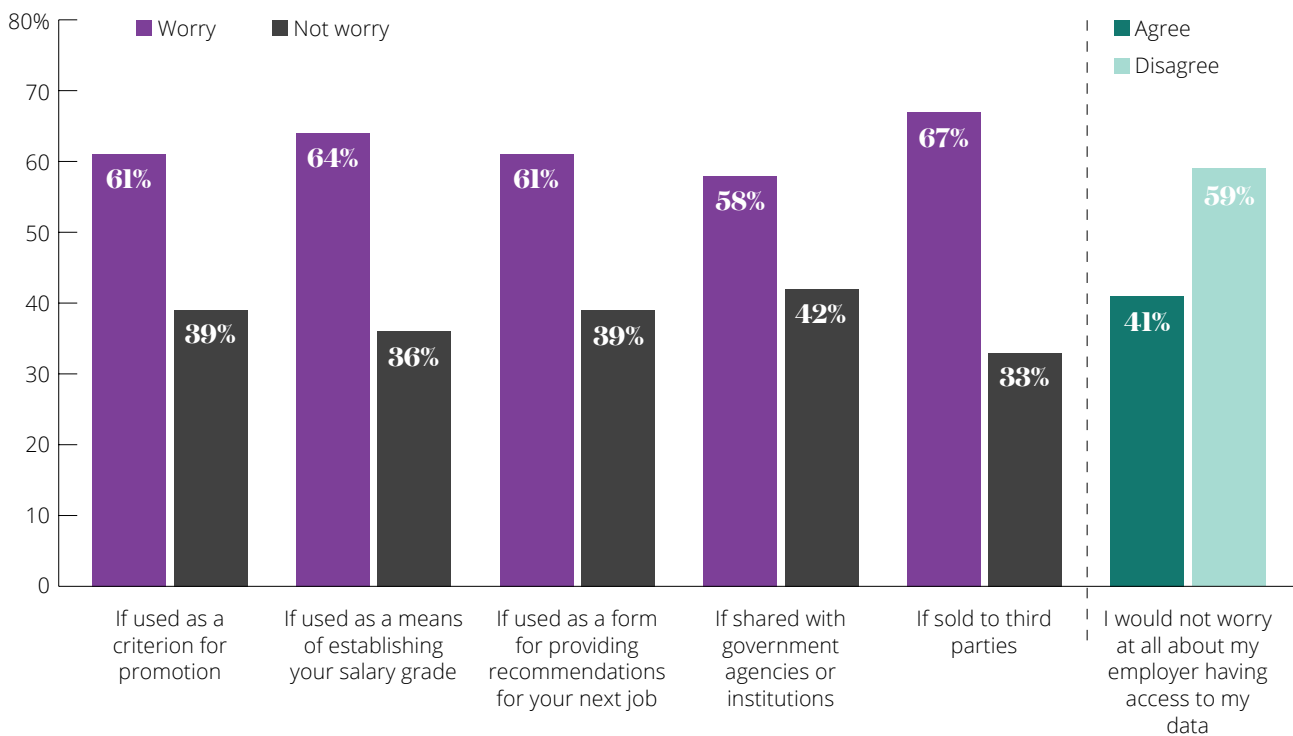
The share of workers who...

- **76%:** Agree that more information provided by phone apps increases their dependence on mobile phones
- **70%:** Check their phone first thing in the morning for work-related messages
- **64%:** Check their phone at bedtime for work-related messages
- **65%:** Check their phone at the weekend for work-related messages
- **65%:** Check their phone whilst on holiday for work-related messages
- **64%:** Worry that they use their phones too much



Chart 3: Worries stemming from external sharing of personal health data or its use to inform career moves

If your employer had access to your confidential health data/profile, which of the following uses would worry you?



The share of workers who would not be happy for their personal health data...

- **61%:** To be used as a criterion for promotion
- **64%:** To be used as a means of establishing salary grade
- **61%:** To be used as a form of providing recommendations for the next job
- **58%:** To be shared with government agencies or institutions
- **67%:** To be sold to third parties

“ Our survey shows that stress resulting from pressure to respond to emails and take phone calls outside of work is felt fairly equally by direct reports and business leaders alike. So, it’s important for the company’s culture to reflect healthy policies that help curb the ‘always-on’ phenomenon and empower people to switch off, and for leaders to set the example. The great thing is that, as we’re highlighting in this report, it’s well within an employer’s control to implement tailored solutions to support the mental and physical well-being of their workforce ”

Simon Miller

Senior Director, Customer Proposition, Aetna International

The mixed view: The impact of technology-enabled working from home

Amidst coronavirus fears, workers are split on the impact of being away from the office.

Key findings:

Workers say that being able to work remotely would...



Help them work shorter hours



Improve their quality of life



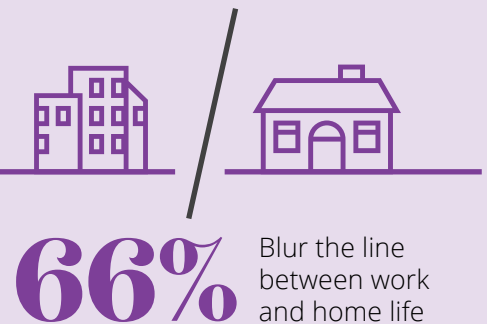
Make them feel less stressed about their work



Improve their physical health



Increase the pressure to respond to work outside of office hours



Blur the line between work and home life

Worker opinions about working remotely:

56%

disagree that it's more stressful than working in the office



44%

agree that it's more stressful than working in the office

As shown in previous sections, workers largely acknowledge both the advantages and disadvantages of workplace technology and digital health tools when it comes to their overall health and well-being. But when asked how technology-enabled remote working affects stress levels, work/life balance and overall well-being, their attitudes are more mixed.

The spread of COVID-19 has upended ways of working and living in profound ways. Organisations have never faced such a universally disruptive crisis, nor have they had more technological tools available to allow their workers to remain on the job whilst living under quarantine. Our survey offers a snapshot of attitudes toward remote working at a unique moment in world history.



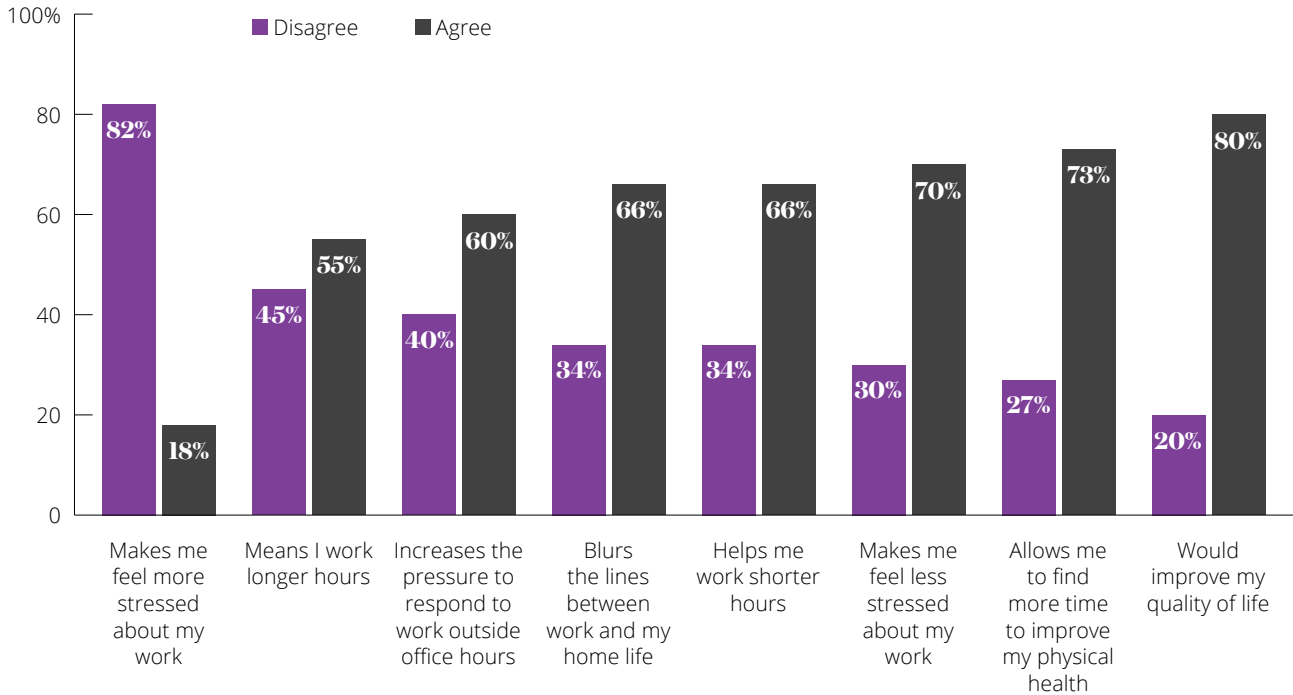
“ There isn't the divide there used to be in people's minds between work and out of work. It's life. To get the best from individuals is about supporting them in their overall well-being in and out of the workplace ”

Simon Miller

Senior Director, Customer Proposition, Aetna International

Chart 1: The positive impact of working remotely

How much do you agree with the following statement? 'Being able to work remotely / from home...'



Positive impact of working remotely

The share of workers who agree that being able to work remotely...

- 80%: Would improve their quality of life
- 73%: Would allow them to find more time to improve their physical health
- 66%: Would help them work shorter hours
- 70%: Would make them feel less stressed about their work

Negative impact of working remotely

The share of workers who agree that being able to work remotely...

- 18%: Would make them feel more stressed about their work
- 66%: Would blur the lines between work and their home life
- 60%: Would increase the pressure to respond to work outside office hours

Variations by region, role and other factors

In large part, this report focuses on across-the-board findings. However, we saw significant variations in opinions based on a host of demographic factors. For example, 96% of employees based in the UAE agreed that remote working helps balance work and life, compared to 73% in the UK, 79% in the U.S. and 83% in Singapore.

Organisations looking to act based on what they read here would be well advised to refer to the appendix and the complete dataset, which is available online.

Chapter 2: The conclusion

Guidelines for employers —
Opportunities for the benefit of all

Our research reveals a clear opportunity for organisations to harness the positives that technology enables — and an equally clear imperative for organisations to diminish the negatives that technology brings. One thing is clear: although the coronavirus outbreak will one day run its course, few organisations will fully return to the norms, cultures, policies and practises that were in place pre-pandemic. It’s now more incumbent upon organisations than ever to understand how to apply technology in ways that enable collaborative, flexible, productive and healthy working practises for the benefit of all.

Business leaders today have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reconsider how their organisations deploy technologies and digital tools to help improve workers’ health and well-being. Our conclusions and guidance for employers are separated into three sections below.

Section 1. Curbing “always-on” culture and employee burnout

Finding:

Employees are struggling with achieving a work/life balance, particularly as they work from home.

Employees clearly see the value that workplace technology brings, but they just as clearly see its shortcomings. They want to unplug when they’re out of the (virtual) office, which can be difficult to do when they carry all the tools of their trade in their pockets. Most respondents recognise that their employers have gone some way to help reduce tech overload, but there’s significant room for improvement.

Guidance for employers:

Leverage employees’ call for more help curbing “always-on” culture and tech overload.

1 Establish workplace policies: If you provide technology to your workers and expect them to use it, erect guardrails to help individuals unplug outside office hours. And those policies should be enforced — not to punish workers but to protect them. In addition, in a world where employees work from home, remotely or even internationally, careful consideration needs to be given to alternatives or schedules for

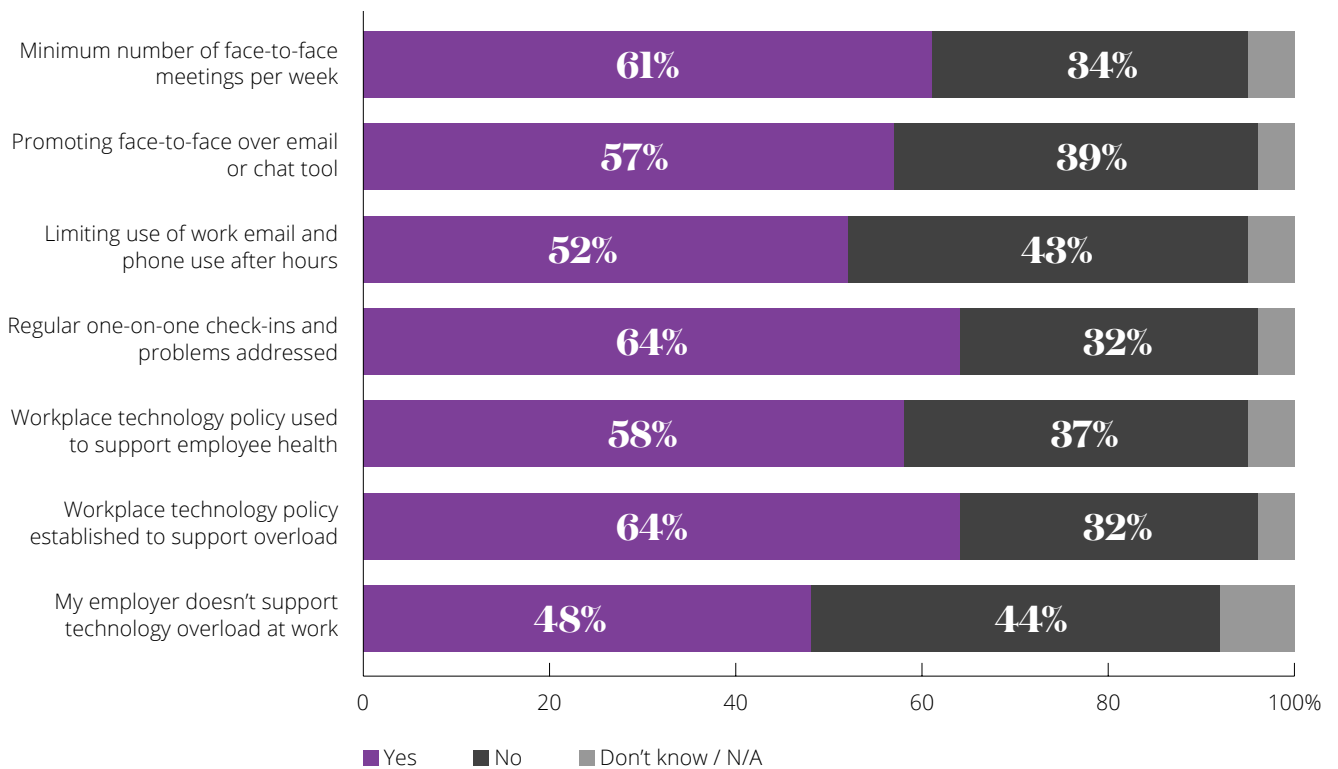
in-person meetings which the data shows are of benefit to employees.

2 Communicate clearly: Communicate workplace policies and educate workers on how to keep work from bleeding into personal life. And that means limiting work-related communications to work hours. Again, organisations operating internationally or across different time zones need to provide a degree of flexibility, give and take, and trust when it comes to establishing boundaries for working hours and out-of-hours communications.

3 Lead by example: Model the balanced company culture you’re promoting. It’s important that business leaders lead by example — especially since they often struggle more with work/life balance than many of their workers. Some practises, such as in-person meetings, might be difficult for international or virtual teams. Being available through one-to-one calls to offer emotional and professional support is a powerful way for leadership teams to explore new or improved guidance or support mechanisms to help meet employees’ needs.

Chart 1: How employers help fight tech overload

Does your employer support and help you tackle technology overload at work in the ways listed below?



The share of respondents who believe their employer supports and helps them tackle technology by...

- **61%:** Ensuring a minimum number of face-to-face meetings per week
- **57%:** Promoting face-to-face communication in the office rather than via email or a chat tool
- **52%:** Limiting the amount of time spent on work email and phone calls after hours
- **64%:** Ensuring that regular one-on-one check-ins take place and any problems are addressed
- **58%:** Using a workplace technology policy to support employees' physical and mental health
- **64%:** Establishing a workplace technology policy to curb excessive workload



Chart 2: How employers maintain personal interaction

Pre-COVID-19, workers saw the value in personal touch.

Ensuring a minimum number of face-to-face meetings per week



Face-to-face communication in the office rather than via technology



Regular one-on-one check-ins to help address employee issues



■ Yes ■ No ■ Don't know / N/A

While millions of people may now be performing their jobs remotely without impact to their productivity or well-being, and while 25% of employees in Silicon Valley have indicated a wish to forevermore work from home⁵, not everyone will share that experience or view.

“ Organisations may now feel more able to offer employees a choice of where and how they work. Some workers want an office environment that facilitates productivity, collaboration and a shared sense of purpose. Others want the support, guidance and trust to work flexibly or remotely ”

Sam McKendrick

Vice President, Human Resources, Aetna International



⁵ <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/19/how-silicon-valley-work-from-home-forever-will-hit-every-worker.html>



Section 2. Harnessing the power of virtual health and digital well-being

Finding:

Employees are calling for increased access to digital health and well-being support.

Individuals are becoming increasingly active consumers of digital health and well-being services. They're Googling their symptoms, using Fitbits and mindfulness apps and tracking their health data online.

Guidance for employers:

Capitalise on workers' call for tech and digital solutions to improve health.

Some organisations and workers alike have embraced digital health tools, as evidenced by the proliferation of wearable fitness trackers, joint mobile health applications, such as Aetna Attain, and workplace wellness programs that are tied to them. These tools can help members establish goals, set fitness schedules and stay on top of their well-being by sending reminders whenever a member is due for a check-up, flu shot or repeat prescription. In many employees' lives, getting one's steps in each day has become as habitual as having a morning cup of tea or coffee. Yet, significant majorities of the workers we surveyed believe their organisations could do more to help them improve both their physical and mental health.

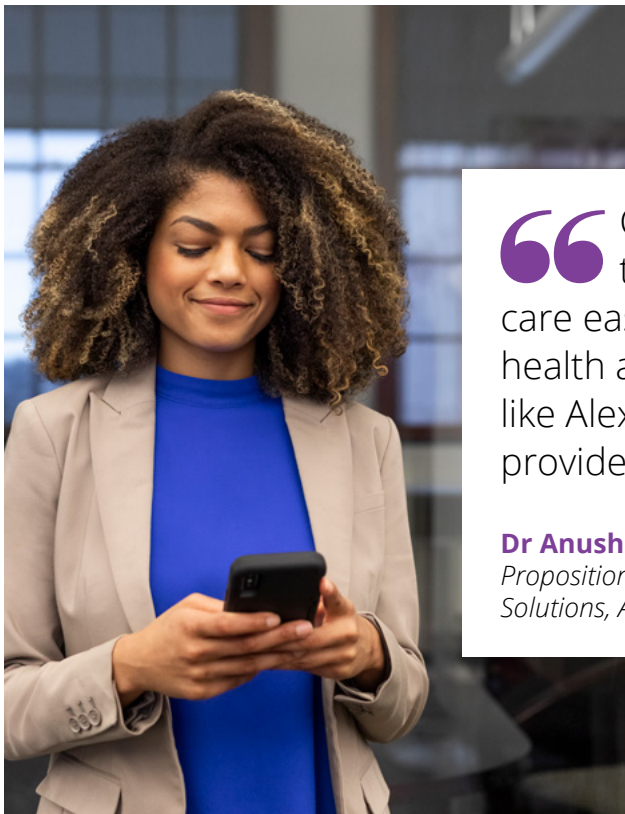
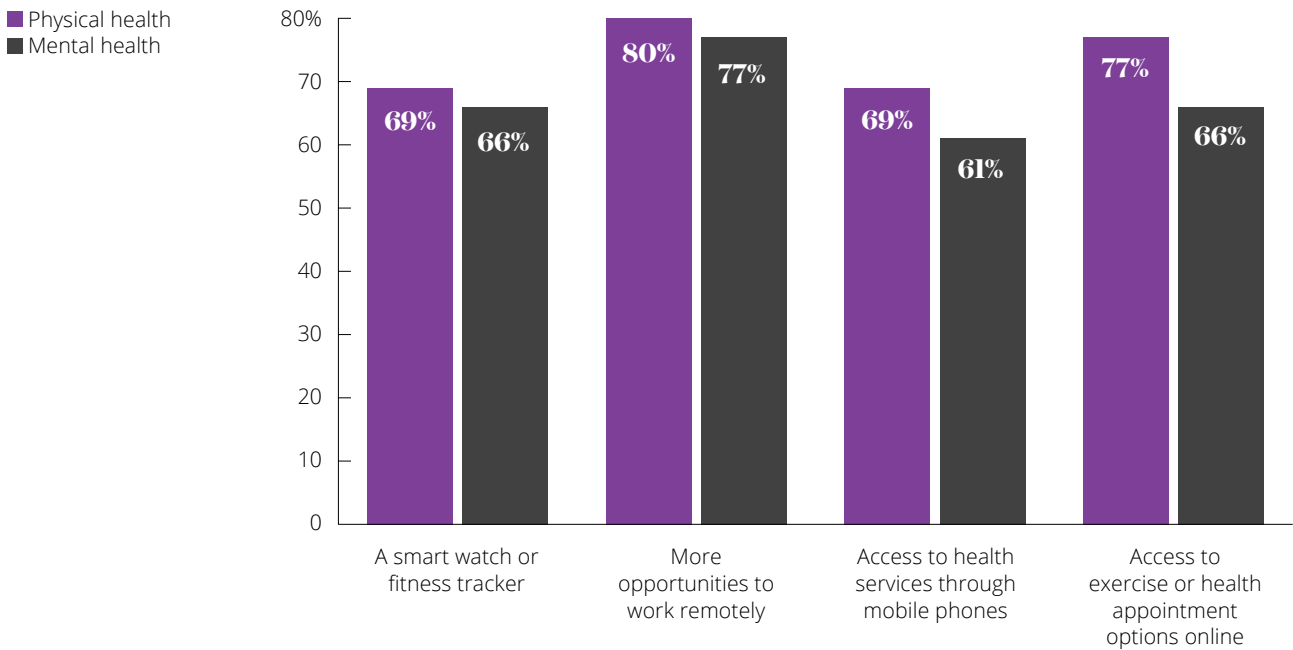
1 Know your audience: Rather than simply hand out Fitbits or launch a wellness initiative, first engage workers via surveys or one-on-one line manager discussions to find out about their areas of interest and appetite for health and wellness apps.

2 Identify your priorities: Audit your employee population to identify health risks and high health claims (keeping in mind that employees overwhelmingly approve of their anonymised health data being used to improve health and wellness offerings).

3 Personalise your approach: Create a customised wellness strategy by identifying and implementing benefits and digital tools to meet the unique needs of your workforce. Talk to your benefits provider or corporate health and wellness partner.

Chart 1: How employers maintain personal interaction

Pre-COVID-19, workers saw the value in personal touch.



“ Consumers are now looking for technologies that make access to health care easier — be that telemedicine or digital health apps or using in-house voice assistants like Alexa to answer their questions and provide the latest evidence or research ”

Dr Anushka Patchava

Proposition & Strategy Lead for vHealth (Global), Population Health Solutions, Aetna International



Section 3. Enabling employees to help build the corporate culture

Finding:

Employees asking for increased clarity and choice around the privacy and use of personal health data.

Employees say they would be happy for their employers to use anonymised data to, for example, improve the company's culture and employee benefits, but they would feel betrayed if their data were shared with third parties or government agencies. Significant majorities of respondents expressed concern about various ways an employer might use health data gathered by fitness trackers and other technologies.

Guidance for employers:

Allay workers' worries that your organisation could misuse sensitive health information.

Employers need to set clear data-use policies, educate employees and allow employees to share in the organisation's future direction. To help alleviate concerns, organisations should establish policies to protect workers' health data and ensure that workers are aware that they retain ownership of that data.



1 Inspire confidence and trust:

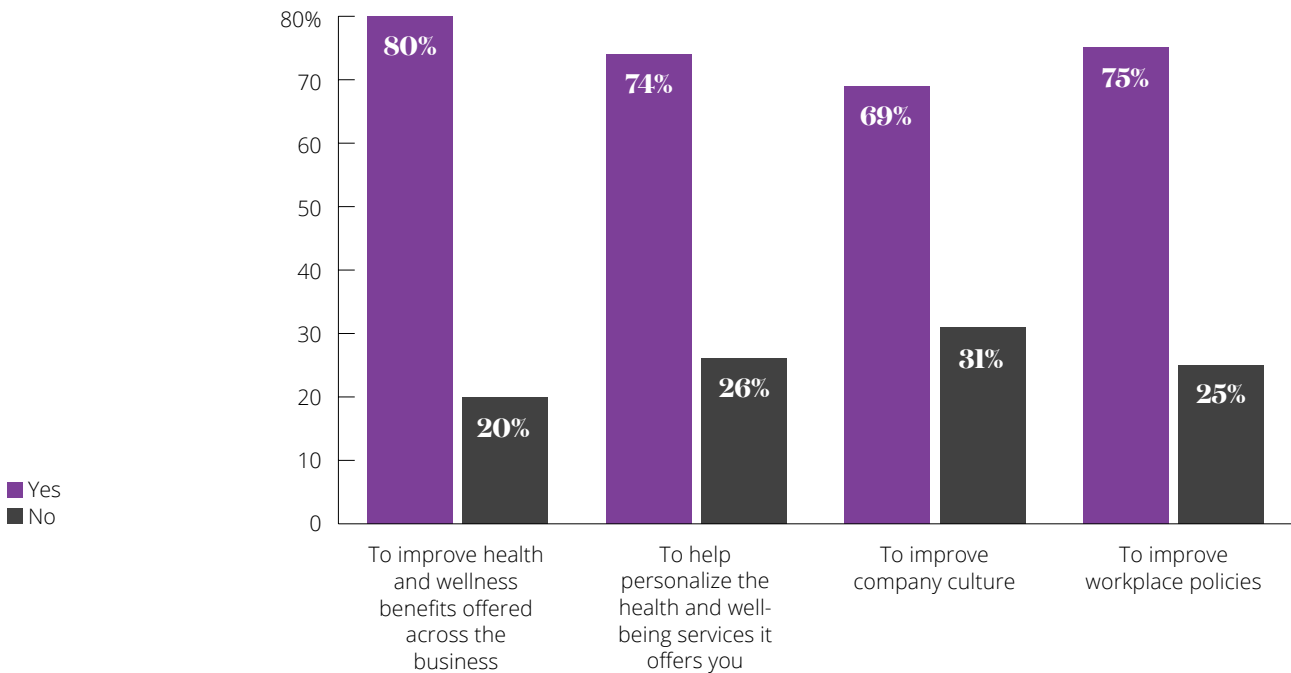
Communicate your commitment to upholding data privacy and to empowering employees to own and retain control over their data. Detail the relevant processes, policies and regulations at play.

2 Build the culture together: Give employees a voice and the chance to help shape the company's culture and join the company on its journey through a shared sense of purpose and values.

3 Celebrate successes: If your use of anonymised health data leads you to start a program that yields measurable results, share that success with workers. Let them see the impact analysing health data can have.

Chart 1: Benefits of sharing anonymised health data

Would you be happy for your employer to use your anonymised health data/profile if it was used for the following reasons?



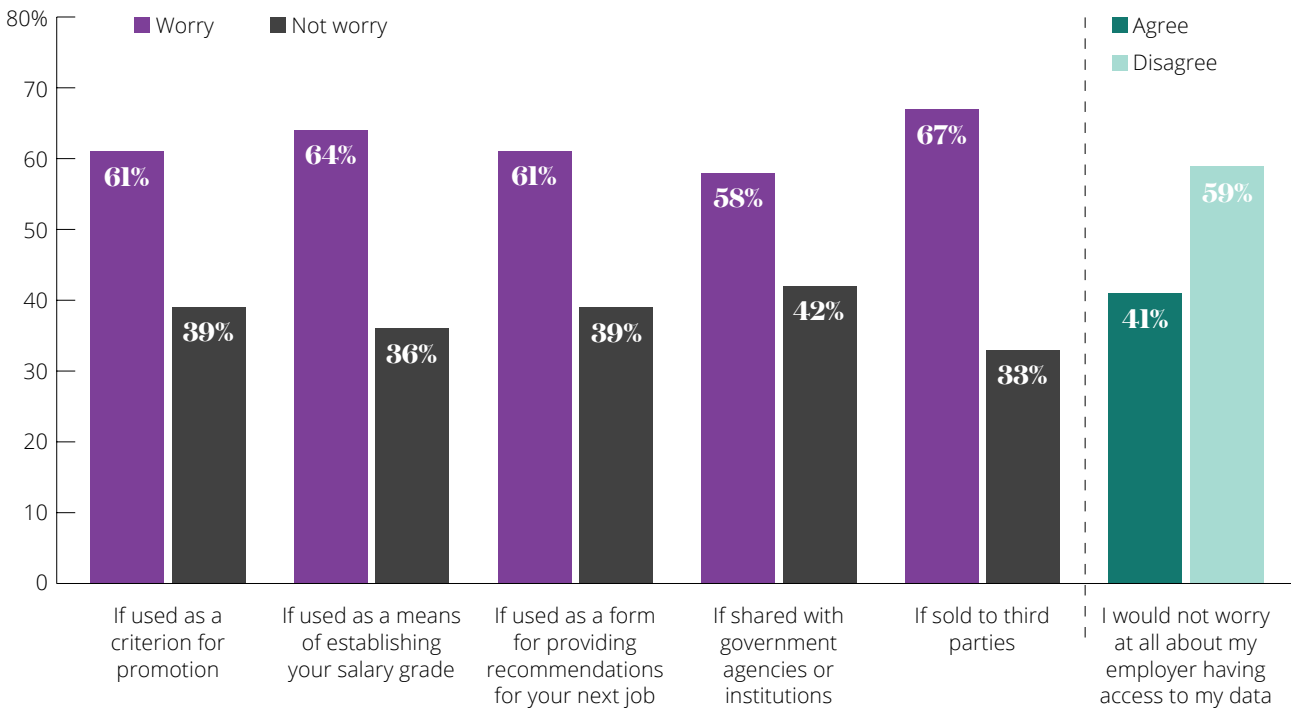
The share of respondents who would be happy if their employer had access to their anonymised health data and...

- **80%:** Used it to improve health and wellness benefits across the company
- **74%:** Used it to help personalise the health and wellness services the company offers
- **69%:** Used it to improve the company culture
- **75%:** Used it to improve workplace policies



Chart 2: Concerns over misuse of health data

If your employer had access to your confidential health data/profile, which of the following uses would worry you?



The share of respondents who would be worried if their employer had access to their anonymised health data and...

- **58%:** Shared it with government agencies or institutions
- **67%:** Sold it to third parties
- **61%:** Used it as a criterion for promotion
- **64%:** Used it to establish salary grade

“ People hold health care data much more personally than other forms of data, and they’re generally less amenable to allowing that data to be shared. For organisations to truly move the needle on personalised health solutions and make improvements to their corporate culture and well-being programmes, they should take the time to clearly communicate the strict regulations and policies that exist around the employee’s ownership and control ”

Dr Anushka Patchava

Proposition & Strategy Lead for vHealth (Global), Population Health Solutions, Aetna International

Final word: Seize the opportunity of a generation

Widespread adoption of digital technology by businesses and the health and well-being industry has been accelerating for years, and that acceleration has only increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However the pandemic plays out and whenever it ends, we will never fully return to pre-2020 attitudes and norms — nor should we.

Organisations today face a once-in-a-generation opportunity to rewrite existing practices and transform the way their workplaces operate. Working in tandem with their health benefits and technology partners, business leaders should harness lessons learnt during the pandemic to create a more holistic approach to employee well-being, embracing the power of technology to positively influence health and well-being.

In the end, we at Aetna International believe workplace technology itself is neither a force for good nor a force for evil. The good or the evil lies in how it is used. If technology improves both business performance and the well-being of employees, it can be a powerful force for good indeed.

For more information on the data sets that inform our insights or the organisation's knowledge and experience, [visit us](#) or [contact us](#). Whether you're an employer, health care broker or intermediary, we're here to help.



Appendix

Whilst high-level results were consistent across the board, there were noticeable differences of opinion on some questions based on age, nationality, job function and other factors. Consider these data points:

- **Only a third** of Britons said working remotely is more stressful than being in the office, whilst **53%** of UAE respondents said the same thing.
- **Nearly three-quarters** of business owners and directors said they use their phones too much, compared with **just 57%** of self-employed and contract workers.
- **More than three-quarters** of workers under age 65 say they will or might someday research mental health issues online, compared with just **42%** of those 65 and older.

Organisations would be advised to take these and other differences into account while plotting return-to-work strategies and re-evaluating remote working policies.

For more information on the regional data sets available for the U.S., UK, UAE and Singapore, or for media enquiries contact:

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