

# The Allen Consulting Group



## Workplace health: Australian workers' perspectives

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Report to Medibank Private

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## Executive summary

Workplace health and wellbeing for Australian workers is an important issue for employers, employees and government. Medibank Private has a strong record in undertaking research into issues affecting workplace health. To further pursue its reputation as a leader in workplace health and inject new thought into this area, Medibank commissioned the Allen Consulting Group to undertake research into workers' perceptions of workplace health in order to:

- examine the differences in the health profile of workers across a number of industries; and
- survey workers' views on workplace health and their expectations of their employers.

This document reports the findings of the research. The report is designed to be an internal research report, which Medibank can draw upon to further examine, analyse and communicate the findings obtained from the study to a range of audiences, which may include other divisions/sections within Medibank and external stakeholders.

The report is based upon a survey of over 5,000 Australian workers across a range of industries. As such, the reported results are based upon *Australian workers' perceptions* of workplace health and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup>

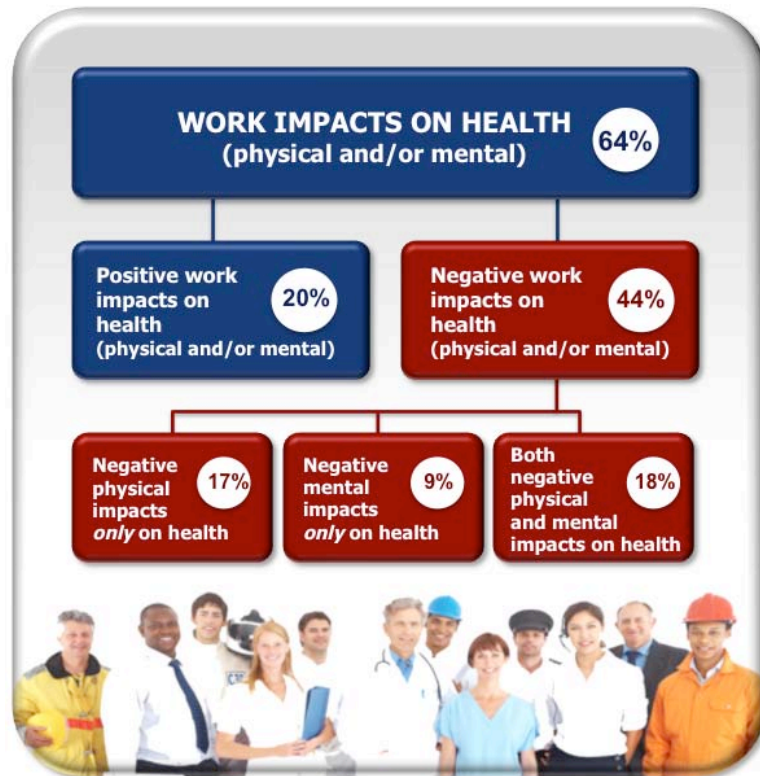
### General views of Australian workers

Currently 69 per cent of Australian workers are happy with their health. Nonetheless, workplace health and wellbeing is an important issue for Australian workers — see Figure ES 1.1.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to understand what is meant by survey respondents' perceptions. Where the report states that '45 per cent of employees surveyed across all industries in this study work for companies that offer health and wellbeing programs to their employees', we note that these results are based upon respondents' perceptions. Therefore it is possible that, in some cases, employees have responded that they work for a company that does not offer health and wellbeing programs because at the time of the survey they were unaware of a program being offered when in fact, their employer does offer a program.

Figure ES 1.1

**IMPACT OF THE WORKPLACE ON AUSTRALIANS' HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

Source: Allen Consulting Group

The majority of Australian workers (64 per cent) perceived that their health and wellbeing was impacted upon in some way (*either positively and/or negatively*) by their work. Of concern however is the 44 per cent of Australian workers reporting that their health and wellbeing was adversely impacted upon in some way. It was found that:

- 17 per cent of Australian workers reported that their *physical health only* was negatively impacted upon by their work;
- 9 per cent of Australian workers reported that their *mental health only* was negatively impacted upon by their work; and
- 18 per cent of Australian workers reported that *both their mental and physical health* was negatively impacted upon by their work.

In addition, the study found:

- A quarter of surveyed Australian workers (26 per cent) consider that they work for an organisation that has a high risk of harm to their physical health. A similar percentage (24 per cent) also considers that they work for an organisation with a high risk of harm to their mental health.

- Most surveyed Australian employees consider that employers have a role in supporting their health and wellbeing.<sup>2</sup>
  - When deciding where to work, 57 per cent of surveyed employees consider that a company's focus on employee health and wellbeing is 'very important' or 'somewhat important'.
  - Furthermore, 85 per cent of workers think that employers should offer workplace health programs or invest in the health and wellbeing of their employees.
  - However, only 45 per cent of employees are offered some kind of workplace health program.
  - In addition, 64 per cent of all surveyed employees think that their employer should subsidise the private health insurance of employees who wish to take it out.
- Of the 45 per cent of employees whose employers offer workplace health programs, a small majority (52 per cent) participate in them. This percentage is equivalent to 23 per cent of all surveyed Australian employees (excluding self-employed workers) participating in at least one workplace health program.
- Across all surveyed industries, the most commonly offered workplace health programs are employee assistance programs (including psychology services), which are offered to 31 per cent of all employees, work injury treatments (to 22 per cent) and health and wellbeing awareness raising initiatives (to 20 per cent).
- The main reasons given by employees for not participating in available workplace health programs are that they are 'too busy' (34 per cent), that they exercise outside of work (33 per cent) and that 'activities run at inconvenient times' (25 per cent).
- The workplace health programs most wanted by employees who are currently not offered health programs are 'on-site health and wellbeing classes and services' (36 per cent), 'exercise/physical activity initiatives (e.g. corporate physical activity competitions)' (35 per cent) and 'regular health screenings' (35 per cent).

### Key differences across demographic groups

Although workplace health and wellbeing has been shown to be an important issue for Australian workers, the study indicates that, among other factors, demographic characteristics play an important role in determining individuals' perceptions concerning this issue and its related aspects (see Section 2.6 and Chapter 3). In summary:

- Sixty-nine per cent of all workers are happy with their health, with significant variations reported by workers depending upon their age, state and territory, workplace environment and nature of work.

<sup>2</sup> An important distinction has been made in this report when referring to 'workers' and 'employees'. The term 'workers' is used when referring to all the people who answered the survey, including the self-employed and people working/employed by businesses. The term 'employee' is used when referring to people working/employed by businesses.

- Thirty-five per cent of all workers perceive their work as having a negative influence on their physical health with variations reported by workers depending upon their age, workplace environment, workplace location and nature of work.
- Twenty-seven per cent of all workers perceive their work as having a negative influence on their mental health with variations reported also by workers depending upon their age, workplace environment, workplace location and nature of work.
- Fifty-two per cent of employees who are aware of available workplace health and wellbeing programs participate in them. Participation rates tended not to vary significantly between individuals with different demographic characteristics apart from self-reported fitness levels.

### **Key differences across industries**

Again although the study shows that workplace health and wellbeing is an important issue for Australian workers, different perceptions concerning this issue and related aspects were found depending upon the particular industry that workers were employed in. Some of these differences are highlighted below.

- The majority of surveyed workers across all industries are happy with their health, with the lowest proportion of workers who are happy with their health in the government sector (57 per cent), and the highest proportion in the mining sector (77 per cent), closely followed by manufacturing (75 per cent).
- The factors that workers would most like to change about their health are broadly similar across industries. There are some similarities between workers in government, finance and manufacturing, all of which have a large proportion of respondents wishing to increase their physical activity and lose weight compared to those in other industries. Eighty per cent of transport workers also want to lose weight while the retail industry has the highest number of workers who want to gain weight — 7 per cent.
- The industries that are perceived, as having the highest risk of physical injury are agriculture and construction, while the industries with the lowest perceived risk are financial services, education and retail.
- Government, transport and healthcare have the highest proportion of workers who consider that work has a negative impact of their physical health. The lowest percentages are reported in the agriculture, retail and education industries.
- The government sector contains the highest proportion of workers reporting a negative impact of work on mental health, where more than two in five workers believe this to be that case. A significant amount of workers in both the education and healthcare sectors also report this effect. The industry with the lowest number of respondents reporting a negative impact of work on mental health is construction.

- Workplace health programs are most prevalent in the government sector (also the industry with the highest number of workers who are unsatisfied with their health). They are least prevalent in industries with a high proportion of workers whose work is physical in nature (e.g. construction and agriculture).
- Participation rates in workplace health programs range from around 37 per cent in retail to 63 per cent in mining, with the average participation rate across industries being around 52 per cent.
- The majority of employees in every industry (besides agriculture and construction) believe that employers should subsidise private health insurance for employees wishing to take it out.
- At least 73 per cent of workers in every industry think that their employers should provide workplace health programs, with the highest percentage of workers thinking this in the government sector and the lowest in agriculture.

### **Key differences by state and territory**

In undertaking the survey, the results were not designed in the first instance to be disaggregated by state and territory. Therefore the survey sample for some of the smaller states and territories is small and the results presented are indicative only. The results presented highlight cases where the findings are not statistically significant. However the results presented do show that although workplace health and wellbeing is an important issue for Australian workers, there are different perceptions depending upon the state/territory in which workers are from.

- There are substantive differences in whether workers are happy with their health by state/territory. The reasons for this are unclear. It may be the case that concentrations of industries in particular states could impact the percentages of workers happy with their health in those states, such as the high proportion of mining industry workers in Western Australia (WA) and Northern Territory (NT).
- Based on whether work has a negative impact on physical or mental health, there are only small differences between states with the exception of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) in which government workers comprise a large percentage of the workers surveyed.
- The majority of employees in the respective states and territories think that employers have an important role in supporting their health and wellbeing.
- In the ACT there is a more widespread provision of workplace health and wellbeing programs and greater participation rates among workers. These results are in line with the results for the government sector.

### **Key differences by workplace location**

There were differences in terms of worker perceptions depending upon the location of their workplace.

- More workers in metropolitan areas consider that their work has a negative impact on their physical health (39 per cent) or their mental health (30 per cent) relative to workers in other locations.

- Fifty-five per cent of workers in remote areas consider that they work in an organisation with a high risk of harm to their physical health, while 20 per cent of metropolitan workers think this.
- Metropolitan (46 per cent) and remote (50 per cent) workers have the greatest access to workplace health programs, while 36 per cent of suburban workers, 39 per cent of regional workers and 32 per cent of rural workers have access to those programs.
- More metropolitan workers believe that employers should subsidise private health insurance (64 per cent) relative to remote (59 per cent), suburban (55 per cent) and regional employees (53 per cent). Only 43 per cent of rural workers believe that employers should subsidise private health insurance.
- Self-employed workers in regional areas appear to be less satisfied relative to those in other areas with 68 per cent feeling they have a good work/life balance compared to around 80 per cent of self-employed workers in other locations.
- Absenteeism from work is higher the closer respondents' workplaces are to metropolitan areas, with days off work for health reasons clearly decreasing with greater remoteness.