



20 STATE OF
23 WORKPLACE
EMPATHY

Mental Health Special Report

Minding the Empathy Gap: HR Is at Their Breaking Point



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The HR Mental Health Crisis

Conflicting priorities, a lack of strategic input, and a growing caseload are putting an impossible burden of responsibility on HR

This year, data from Businessolver's eighth annual State of Workplace Empathy study paints a clear picture: The empathy disconnect is taking a devastating toll on HR's mental health and wellbeing in the workplace. The data strongly underscores the HR mental health crisis—and that many organizations are quickly losing time to ease the burden and remedy the culture.



61% of HR professionals say they've experienced a mental health issue in the past year, up nearly 10 points from 2022

Generalist. Therapist. Compliance expert. Benefits guide. Payroll. Mediator. Negotiator. Recruiter. Corporate communications.

These are just a few of the hats HR has been forced to double up on over the past three years as employers navigated remote work, shifting compliance requirements, a turbulent economy, and an intense talent market.

Since the onset of the pandemic in 2020, HR has experienced a drastic uptick in mental health issues as the responsibilities doubled, tripled, and quadrupled in just three short years.

Competing priorities between the C-suite and employees have created a tension that has HR backed into a corner. Return to office, health and wellness benefits, and empathy perceptions are pushing mental health to an all-time low. Stabilizing the bottom line and differing perspectives on empathy are coming at the cost of mental wellbeing in the workplace:

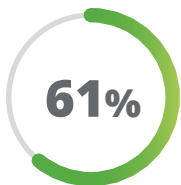
- HR professionals are burned out
- Mental health benefits and resources still don't align with employees' needs and expectations
- The empathy disconnect is crushing culture

HR Is Burning Out. Fast.

The state of workplace empathy today has deteriorated since we last reported in 2022. The data paints a grim picture of HR's mental health and empathy perceptions as a whole. In fact, according to a study from [Workvivo](#), **98%** of HR say they're burned out and it's manifesting in dreading work and emotional fatigue.



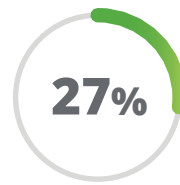
HR's mental health decline by the numbers



HR PROFESSIONALS

Mental health issues

61% say they've experienced a mental health issue in the past year, compared to 51% of employees and 31% of CEOs



HR PROFESSIONALS

Lack of motivation

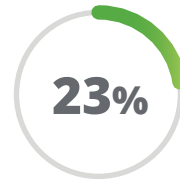
27% say they don't feel motivated at work



HR PROFESSIONALS

Experience less empathy

68% say their organization is empathetic, down 23 points from 2022



HR PROFESSIONALS

Return to office issues

23% say return to office has had a negative impact on their mental health



84%
of HR believe empathy is undervalued in today's workplace organizations

But this data, unfortunately, isn't a surprise.

In the last year alone, significant shifts have forced HR into a tailspin of trying to balance enforcing decisions from the C-suite and employee feedback, most notably when it comes to workplace culture. HR is burning out as they're forced to navigate a minefield of business decisions, policies, strategy, and people, all while being responsible for a connected culture. And they're managing it all with very little support, no autonomy, and disparate technology (or none at all).

Additionally, employees are also reaching their breaking points as they grapple with disconnected priorities and vague communication from the C-suite about workplace culture, return to office, and how their organization will prioritize mental wellbeing. These employees are looking to HR for solutions, adding additional burden to HR's shoulders.



Employees are struggling alongside HR



EMPLOYEES

Mental health issues

51% of employees say they've experienced a mental health issue, up 3 points from 2022



EMPLOYEES

Lack of motivation

41% don't feel motivated at work



EMPLOYEES

Mental health importance

43% don't feel that their employer talks about the importance of mental health



EMPLOYEES

Mental health openness

30% feel that they can't talk about their mental health in the workplace



EMPLOYEES

Experience less empathy

66% feel their company is empathetic, down 3 points from 2022



EMPLOYEES

Willing to leave

80% of employees (including HR themselves) are confident they can find a new, more empathetic, employer



As mental health declines so do empathy perceptions:

Only **68%** of HR professionals feel their company is empathetic, a 23-point decrease from 2022. Additionally, **84%** of HR professionals feel that empathy is undervalued by employers as a whole.

And it's no wonder:

- CEOs are pushing for return to office as employees struggle to advocate for more flexibility.
- Mental health benefits offered in the workplace don't align with what employees want or say they need.
- HR often has little to no say in decisions being made, yet they're responsible for strategizing and executing them across the business.

Three years ago, organizations looked at the added workload as a temporary hassle as they navigated remote work, the state of emergency, and employee safety. But three years later, as many organizations are pushing to "get back to normal," HR's workload is anything but normal.






On top of managing C-suite decisions out to employees—and the ensuing fallout and confusion—HR is also often doing so with very few tools and resources to keep each priority working in sync, alongside elevating feedback, and managing their workforce. Compassion fatigue was apparent last year, but now many HR organizations are beyond fatigue and burning out.

This data is the final wakeup call for today's workplaces: Reconnect with empathy or risk your culture as employees and HR burnout from the apathy.

Misaligned Mental Health Benefits

The empathy disconnect is, in part, born from a disconnect in benefits, specifically benefits that help people take care of their wellbeing, their mental health, and their need to have flexibility in all aspects of their lives.

Employees and HR are crying out for more diverse and equitable benefits, yet the tools and resources either aren't available or aren't visible enough to employees. There's an average 60-point disparity between the benefits employees value for their mental wellbeing versus what's available to them through their employer.

BENEFITS	EMPLOYEE BENEFIT Importance	EMPLOYEE BENEFIT Offered	EMPLOYEE BENEFIT Used
 Mental health coverage included in the benefits enrollment process	92%	30%	10%
 EAPs with diagnostics, support, and treatment services	91%	30%	10%
 Flexible work hours	91%	35%	27%
 Encouraged to take time away from work	90%	26%	14%
 Open-door policy for face-to-face communications with managers and HR	92%	37%	17%

This benefits disconnect is underscored by an awareness and utilization gap between employees and CEOs.

The data shows that while the gap between expectations and offerings exists, there's also a lack of awareness among a majority employees, especially among their top-desired benefits.

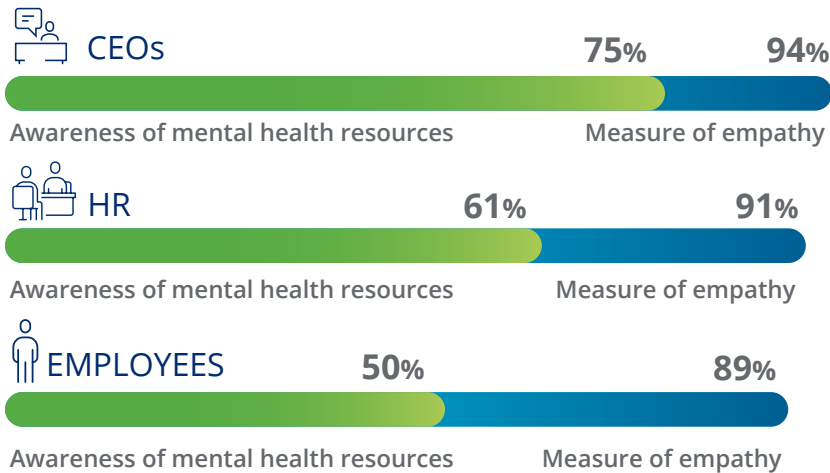
Part of the disconnect between what employees want versus what's available to them may be due in part to a lack of visibility.

Once again, HR is on the hook as they're often looked to as the healthcare markers of the organization to not only administer benefits to employees, but drive utilization. And while administering benefits certainly falls under HR's purview, these teams are often working without the technology, tools, and people support needed to develop and deliver a successful benefits strategy—resulting in low benefits visibility, low employee engagement, and poor utilization.



But the mental health empathy disconnect reveals itself again in the numbers. According to this year's data, CEOs feel aware, supported, healthy, and productive. But employees and HR are trailing far behind, struggling to maintain a balance or find the right resources for their needs.

Awareness of mental health resources is not equal. CEOs are more likely to know what resources are available to them compared to HR and employees. But a majority agree that mental health benefits are a critical measure of empathy in the workplace:



We're no strangers to HR's benefits burden

Our latest Benefits Insights data looks at the challenges HR is up against and the tools that many of them might already have at their fingertips.

[See the data for yourself](#)



That's a wide gap between all three groups for a metric many employees use to score their employer's empathy.

And these same HR professionals and employees are getting ready to call the perceived bluff when it comes to a lack of mental health support and benefits: **8 in 10** employees and HR professionals are confident they can find a new, more empathetic employer, even if that means less pay and longer hours.

Much of the strife around the lack of visibility into benefits is due in part to the difficulty many face in understanding their benefits to begin with, let alone knowing where, when, and how to access those tools and resources.

But this doesn't absolve employers of a responsibility to align their benefits with their employees, needs—that is, after all, a key metric for retention. But the onus can't be entirely on HR to define, administer, budget for, market, and manage those benefits, because these same teams are often up against the same hurdles as the employees, but with the added pressure of driving workplace wellbeing and proving its effectiveness and performance to the C-suite.

The empathy disconnect is creating a culture clash, and this is only aggravated by a lack of access to and visibility of meaningful mental health benefits.



A Culture of Burden and Stigma

The throughline in the empathy and mental health data is the impact on workplace culture and connectedness. At its core, empathy is the ability to understand and experience the feelings of another.

Yet the data is telling us that the empathy disconnect is manifesting in a culture of burden and burnout for HR as CEOs turn their attention back to the bottom line to build stability for their employees and the business, and employees disengage in search for a better experience. As mental health loses luster among the C-suite, employees and HR are feeling more disconnected and devalued than ever before.



HR PROFESSIONALS

Unsafe environment

21% of HR don't feel that they have a safe environment at work to manage their mental health, up 14 points from 2022



HR PROFESSIONALS

Mental health openness

69% of HR say that their workplace has open conversations about mental health at work, down 12 points from 2022



HR PROFESSIONALS

Experience less empathy

Only 68% of HR feel that their company is empathetic, a sharp 23-point decrease from 2022



Conflicting Mental Health Attitudes are Crushing the Culture.

30% of employees and **21%** HR (up 14 points from 2022) don't feel that their company has created a safe environment for employees to talk about their mental health.

Yet **70%** feel that their managers emphasize the importance of mental health.

The mental health stigma isn't new, but it is still alive and well in today's workplace culture—virtual and in-person. **88%** of HR professionals believe that it's important for senior leadership to openly discuss mental health issues, yet only half themselves feel safe enough to reach out to someone at work when they're having a mental health crisis.

And while **96%** of those interactions had an empathetic response, the hesitation to even initiate contact in the first place emphasizes how the empathy disconnect is damaging culture and promoting the mental health stigma.

This hesitancy, in conflict with HR attitudes about the importance of mental health in the workplace, further underscores the culture of burden on HR. The many hats they're forced to wear also manifest in owning the many results and responsibilities attached to those roles, which often leaves manifest in owning the many results and responsibilities attached to those roles, which often leaves HR on the hook for the results—good or bad.

The Bottom Line on Mental Health

Here's how employers can put out the flames on HR burnout



HR burnout isn't going to be resolved with a few extra mental health days, a virtual retreat, or a quarterly email from the CEO about prioritizing self-care. As we see the long-term impact of the empathy disconnect across culture and benefits, employers also need to see how that's represented on their HR teams and on the bottom line.

When mental wellbeing suffers, culture and belongingness suffer. And without culture, you don't have people, or a company.

✓ Recalibrate the HR case load

Ask your HR teams what tools, technology, and resources they need to be successful in their role. Empower managers across the organization with the tools, training, and resources to be HR's advocates for their teams, including:

- Amplifying mental health benefits
- Restructuring check-ins and 1:1s to make mental wellbeing a priority in conversations

✓ Give HR a strategic voice

Invite HR to strategic business and policy discussions so they can provide insight and recommendations about downstream impact, like deployment, training, culture, and more. This might look like assessing a return-to-office or hybrid workspace strategy or pulling more HR data into boardroom discussions.

Help HR connect with their strategic partners across the business, like finance and legal, to help streamline decision-making and illuminate the HR perspective during critical conversations.

✓ Make mental health a visible priority

Move C-suite conversations beyond the bottom line. Talk about the value of mental health and wellbeing and help your organization understand how mental health is being prioritized across the organization, from benefits to having a safe space to talk about what people are going through.

Help your employees connect with the benefits available to them by marketing the availability and value of those benefits. This might look like:

- Sending out regular reminders about your EAP program
- Showcasing new and existing electable benefits ahead of open enrollment
- Leveraging employee feedback to build out a strategic mental health benefits communication plan





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About the State of Workplace Empathy Study

Since 2016, Businessolver has surveyed a diverse cross-section of more than 3,000 employees, HR professionals, and CEOs across multiple industries to examine the behaviors, benefits, and attitudes that make a workplace empathetic. In our survey, empathy is defined as “the ability to understand and experience the feelings of another.”



Learn more about our findings, trends, and recommendations across eight years of data at Businessolver.com/empathy



Market-Leading Benefits
Technology + Innovative,
High-Touch Services

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