

A people leader's guide to active care



What it is and why
it's the next big trend
in employee wellbeing

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Introduction

Pre-2020, few employers meaningfully acknowledged that work and personal lives were inextricably linked. Instead, they sustained “the myth of separate worlds”, as labelled by Harvard Business School’s Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter,¹ and did not see an employee’s wellbeing as their responsibility.

For example, if an employee lost sleep at night or needed a medical consultation, that was their out-of-hours problem. If their partner was ill and unable to fulfil childcare duties, that was their private issue to fix. If a worker’s safety outside of work hours was at risk, there was no reason for the workplace to intervene. If an employee had mental health concerns, it was assumed they would ring the helpline number on the lunchroom poster after they clocked off.

But, somewhere between the blur of Zoom calls, living room intrusions, hybrid work discussions, lockdown stress, and an increase in family and domestic violence (FDV)², the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated a cultural shift that was already in motion, and the world of work irrevocably changed.

¹ Work and Family in the United States ² The Harvard Gazette, Australian Institute of Criminology



considered their employer
their main source of
mental health support



In 2023, employee wellbeing and retention strategies need to recognise that:

- **Employees want more control.**³ From shopping and entertainment to transport and beyond, people now expect to be able to choose what they want, when they want, and how they want it. This includes their employee wellbeing experience, which should enhance the autonomy and control they have become accustomed to in their day-to-day lives.
- **Employees expect employers to step up.**⁴ For many, their health and safety depends on it. If they cannot see a doctor in a medical emergency or access FDV leave when their situation at home has become untenable, their lives can be at risk. In a powerful message of priorities, 91 per cent of 2,000 employees surveyed in Australia thought it was important for their next employer to offer mental wellbeing support,⁵ and more than one-third of 1,000 workers surveyed in Australia considered their employer their main source of mental health support.⁶

³ Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, PwC, Harvard Business Review ⁴ Harvard Business Review

⁵ Sonder (October 2022 survey of 2,000 employees in Australia, conducted by McGregor Tan) ⁶ PwC and Atlassian

Now more than ever, employee wellbeing needs to be a shared responsibility because:

- **Employers need employees to be safe and well.** “Workers’ wellbeing is a key factor in determining an organisation’s long-term effectiveness,” says the International Labour Organization.⁷
- **Many employees can’t do it alone.** With Australians waiting longer for urgent healthcare appointments, being turned away when their case is too complex, or delaying vital health care because of cost, it’s clear that many employees need help to stay safe and well.⁸
- **Poor wellbeing is costly.** Productivity losses from absenteeism can range between 1.4 to 2.8 times the value of an impacted worker’s wage⁹, and replacing a worker can cost up to 33 per cent of their wage.¹⁰



A shared responsibility means:

- Taking an **active care approach**. “Taking action in order to achieve something, rather than just hoping for it or achieving it in an indirect way”,¹¹ by deliberately building a culture that enables and empowers employees to actively participate in positive health and safety behaviours and outcomes.
- Acting with a **sense of urgency**. Organisations are leaking millions of dollars each year in absenteeism, presenteeism, workers’ compensation, employee turnover, and the ripple effect of lost productivity from colleagues and family members¹² – and the longer that people are unsafe or unwell, the worse their conditions can become.¹³

7 International Labour Organization 8 The Age, News Limited, Australasian College for Emergency Medicine, Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, Nine News, ABC News, The Australian
9 ScienceDirect 10 Work Institute 11 Collins Dictionary 12 Direct Health Solutions, Australian Broadcasting Commission, The Centre for International Economics, Medibank, Safe Work Australia, Sonder
13 World Health Organization

What is active care?



“ I think we are moving away from what I would describe as paternalistic wellbeing, where we've said, "This is what we've got, you need to do it", towards a model of empowering people to choose what's right for them, at the time that it's right for them.

We can't do wellbeing to people. We've got to inspire them to want to learn or to want to change, or to want to understand more about their own personal wellbeing.”



Hannah Pearsall
Head of Wellbeing, Hays UK

5 key elements of active care

1 Acknowledgement

To solve any organisational problem, stakeholders need to first acknowledge and gain consensus on it. Without this, it will be difficult to obtain buy-in for a solution.

In the case of employee wellbeing, the problem is twofold:

- Many employees cannot easily access the care they need to stay safe and well; and
- This is affecting organisational performance.

Why can't employees access the care they need?

Employees do not have equal access to care

- A \$50 gap payment at the local doctor might be a drop in the ocean to one employee, but to their colleague, it could be the barrier that prevents them from seeking care.
- A five-hour wait at the emergency room may be inconvenient for one employee, but an impossibility for their ill colleague who cannot leave their children alone at night.
- A study in England and Wales found, "People further down the social ladder usually run at least twice the risk of serious illness and premature death than those at the top".¹⁴
- A reported 80 per cent of men are unlikely to seek help from a phone helpline.¹⁵
- A psychologist appointment can be "especially scarce" in rural and remote communities, and unreliable internet can limit their access to virtual care.¹⁶
- An FDV victim experiencing coercive control might not have the money, transport, or 'permission' to seek care.

¹⁴ World Health Organization ¹⁵ Ten to Men ¹⁶ McKinsey & Company

“ Access block for medical and mental health care is the most pressing issue of our time. More and more members are reaching out to us because they are feeling blocked from accessing care due to cost, or they cannot access quality care within a reasonable amount of time.

For the first time in Medicare's history, the average out-of-pocket cost (gap payment) for a standard GP consult exceeds the Medicare rebate that a patient receives. With the average out-of-pocket charge increasing by 50 per cent over the last decade, people are increasingly looking for alternative ways to access professional medical care.”

Dr Jamie Phillips MB ChB, AFCHSM, DIMC RCS(Edin), MRCGP(UK), FACRRM(EM)
Medical Director at Sonder

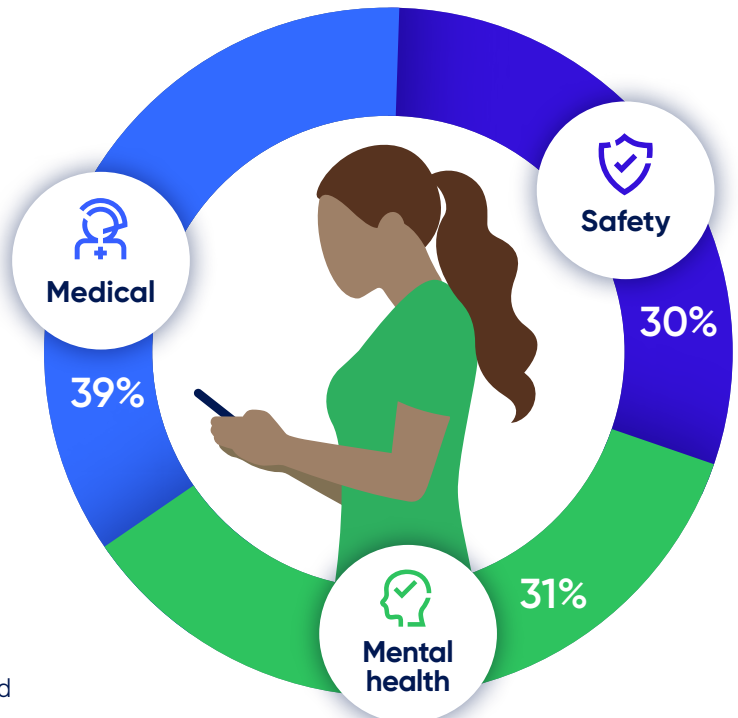


Most employer offerings exclude the most-needed form of support: medical

- In our sample cohort of 10,000+ people who utilised employer-funded care, we found that medical support (39 per cent) was required more than either mental health (31 per cent) or safety (30 per cent) support.^{17 #}

Wellbeing can be complicated

- In this same cohort, 71.9 per cent of people had more than one presenting condition (including 18.3 per cent who had five or more presenting conditions).¹⁸
- A one-size-fits-all referral to an employer-funded psychologist is not enough.
- Unless there is a centralised triage by a qualified clinician, conditions can be overlooked (or treated in the wrong order) and employees can be deterred from seeking help.



*Sonder usage data (Jul-Oct 2022)

Excludes cases classified as "other"

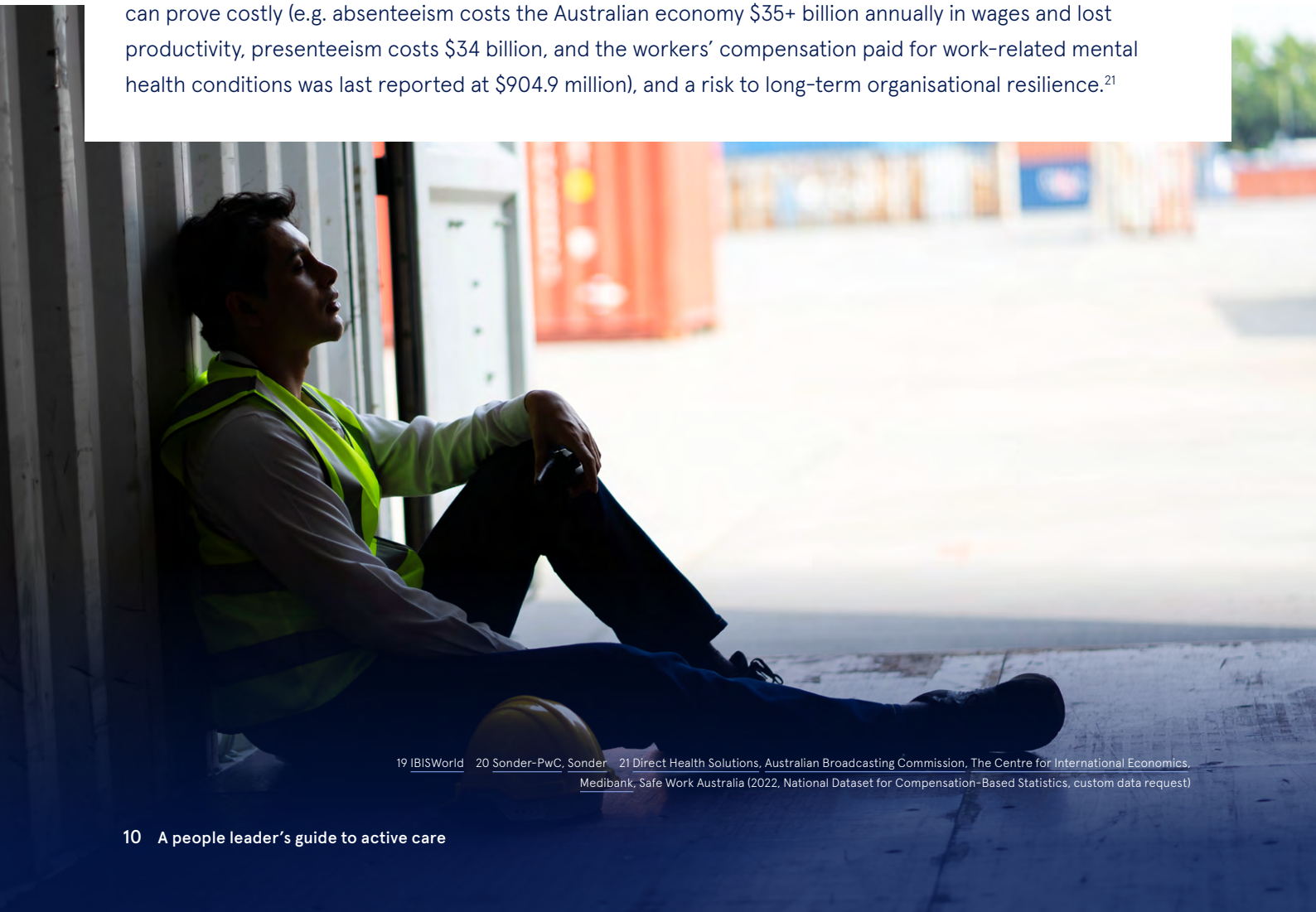
17 Sonder 18 Sonder

What about employee assistance programs (EAPs)?

Traditional employee assistance programs (EAPs) are well-intentioned but suffer a utilisation rate as low as five per cent.¹⁹ Reasons for this include: they are not built into the culture; the solutions are not the right fit; and poor past experiences.²⁰

Why is this affecting business performance?

When employees are not well, their poor wellbeing typically presents in the workplace as absenteeism, presenteeism, emotional contagion, workers' compensation claims, and/or resignation. Each of these can prove costly (e.g. absenteeism costs the Australian economy \$35+ billion annually in wages and lost productivity, presenteeism costs \$34 billion, and the workers' compensation paid for work-related mental health conditions was last reported at \$904.9 million), and a risk to long-term organisational resilience.²¹



¹⁹ IBISWorld ²⁰ Sonder-PwC, Sonder ²¹ Direct Health Solutions, Australian Broadcasting Commission, The Centre for International Economics, Medibank, Safe Work Australia (2022, National Dataset for Compensation-Based Statistics, custom data request)

2 Shared responsibility

Some leaders argue it's not their responsibility to solve employee access to health care, even though the 2021 PwC-Atlassian survey of 1,000 employees in Australia showed that mental health and wellness was the top societal issue, followed by access to health care, cost of living, and cost of health care.²²

The best leaders take a more active care approach - to help their employees stay safe and well, because **sharing the responsibility for physical and mental wellbeing is a mutual win-win**. The healthier and happier an employee, the more engaged and productive they are in the workplace, and the more financial benefit they are likely to contribute to an organisation.²³



²² PwC and Atlassian ²³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Ipsos, The Wall Street Journal, Society for Human Resource Management, Public Health Reports, University of Oxford, Sonder ²⁴ Twitter

“ A shared sense of responsibility is critical to the mission of Team Global Express. It should be critical to the mission of any company.”

Heidi Beck, Chief People Officer,
Team Global Express (2022)



“ Our CEO believes there's a shared responsibility for wellbeing. So I said yes, people are responsible, but we also have a responsibility to give them the tools to be able to support them - and what we [were] doing [wasn't] enough.”

Kate Mayers, National WHS Manager,
Best&Less (2022)





Australia

In Australian workplaces (excluding the mining sector), on-site health clinics are rare.

However, there are a growing number of employers proactively funding employee telehealth services and/or innovative EAP alternatives that combine a digital app with medical, psychology, and other specialist services in one single-entry point. Woolworths Group, PwC, Team Global Express, Best&Less, NRMA, Probe CX, and Marley Spoon are examples of companies leading the charge.²⁵



United States

In the United States, where employers have long been required to share a more active approach to employee health care, many companies offer on-site health clinics.

According to a pre-pandemic national workplace study by Mercer, 33 per cent of companies with 5,000 or more workers, and 18 per cent of mid-sized companies with 500 - 4,999 workers, offered an on-site or nearby health clinic.²⁶



United Kingdom

In workplaces in the United Kingdom, on-site health clinics exist²⁷ but are not commonplace.

To attract top talent, some companies offer premium private health insurance as part of their total compensation package. Private health insurance may provide access to clinics with shorter wait times or cover more elective procedures. Some employers also provide specific types of care that are not provided by the National Health Service (NHS) or included in private health plans.²⁸

²⁵ Woolworths Group, Sonder ²⁶ goShadow ²⁷ Hospital Management ²⁸ Remote

3 Empowerment

What is empowerment?

The concept of empowerment is “rooted in the 1960s ideology of social action, which embraces community change, capacity building, and collectivity”. But, the term “empowerment” comes from American psychologist, Julian Rappaport, who in 1981 articulated it to describe the process “by which people, organisations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs”.²⁹

Empowerment is about overcoming powerlessness and developing skills for self-sufficiency.³⁰ Technically, it can be either a process, an emergent state, or an active behaviour, and it has different definitions nuanced for different contexts,³¹ but for our purposes:

- **Patient empowerment** is a multidimensional process of enhancing people’s abilities to meet their needs, solve their problems, and control their lives.³²
- **Employee empowerment** is a management philosophy (popularised by the Total Quality Management movement) that prioritises giving employees the autonomy, resources, and support they need to act independently, to better assist an organisation to meet its goals.³³

Can employees achieve empowerment by ability and motivation alone?

It is difficult for employees to achieve empowerment and break down barriers alone because it typically requires a structural sharing of power (in addition to the provision of knowledge, resources, and meaningful support).³⁴



who sought help reported they wouldn't have sought support at all without [the tool we provided].³⁵

Woolworths Group Sustainability Report 2022



²⁹ American Journal of Community Psychology, Wikipedia

³⁰ Psychooncology, Wikipedia ³¹ Health Policy, Wikipedia

³² European Patients' Forum, Journal of Advanced Nursing,

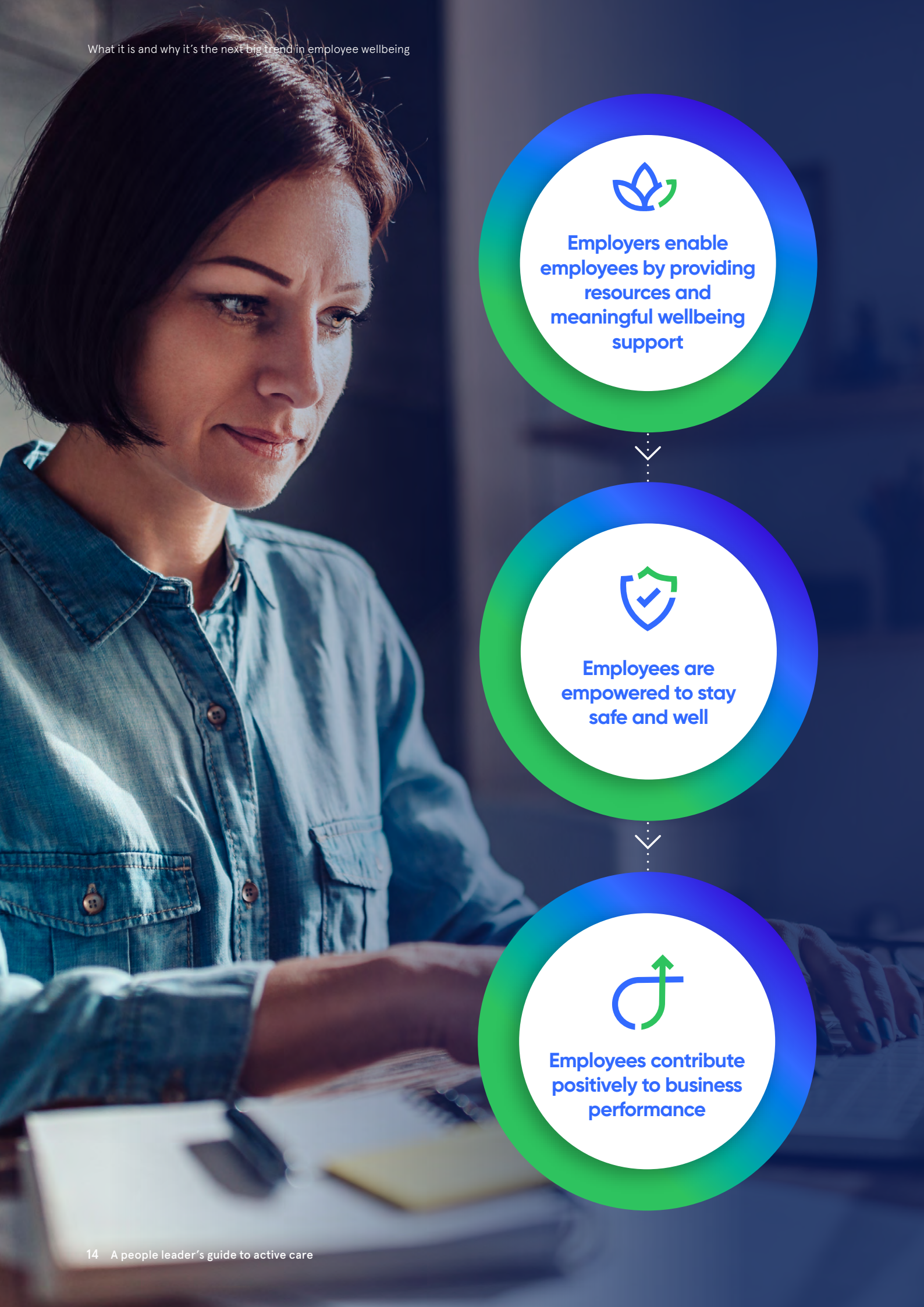
18th International Symposium on Health Information Management Research,

Centre for Health Promotion Research ³³ Society for Human Resource Management,

2nd International Symposium on Sustainable Development,

Total Quality Management & Business Excellence

³⁴ Health Policy, Health Education Behavior, Health Affairs ³⁵ Woolworths Group



Active participation

Employee participation is central to a culture of active care. Once employees are empowered to improve their wellbeing outcomes, they need to actively participate in the solutions if they are to achieve their goals. This is infinitely easier if the solutions match their needs, terms, and schedule.

How can organisations facilitate active participation?

They can learn from Netflix and Uber. These market leaders make active participation super easy, with solutions that are tailored, user-friendly, and 24/7 - which offer people the flexibility to decide when, where, and how to engage. They deliver simplicity, immediate gratification, and importantly, full control. If organisations want to put on-demand health care in the hands of their people, this is how to do it.

Are digital-only solutions the answer?

The evidence says no. Digital-only solutions risk gaps in patient assessment (because wellbeing issues can be complex and multilayered), and their lack of human interaction can result in high user drop-off.³⁶

Self-help apps can provide valuable initial guidance, but they should complement, not substitute, professional health care and robust clinical governance.³⁷ They should enhance a more holistic and comprehensive employee wellbeing strategy, not be the strategy.³⁸

What type of active care solutions are the answer?

Digital wellbeing solutions that best facilitate active participation combine:

- The **on-demand** nature of immediate care (helping employees get well faster);
- The **convenience** of self-help (knowledge resources to drive help-seeking behaviour early);
- The **expertise** of human help (for improved accuracy and clinical efficacy); and
- The **simplicity** of smart technology (giving employees one app, rather than 10-20 apps).

³⁶ Annals of Family Medicine, Sonder, BMJ Mental Health, JMIR Mental Health ³⁷ JMIR Mental Health ³⁸ Sonder

5 Better outcomes

Research has regularly shown that employee empowerment – an essential element of active care – is positively associated with a broad range of employee outcomes³⁹ and has produced many positive business outcomes.

For example:

- In May 2022, after Airbnb announced employees could work from wherever they were "most productive", their careers page was viewed 800,000 times in four days. By empowering their employees and making them "really happy", Airbnb increased **attraction and satisfaction** rates, and likely increased **engagement and retention** as well.⁴⁰
- In May 2021, a study of 23,468 workers in Europe showed that "structural empowerment positively related to psychological empowerment, which was positively related to **job satisfaction, work engagement, and social wellbeing**".⁴¹
- In March 2017, when Four Seasons was awarded Fortune's 2017 "Great Place to Work Legend" after its employees named it employer-of-choice for the 20th consecutive year, the company responded:

"The same level of care that we extend to our guests applies to our people. By empowering our employees and giving them the tools and trust needed to succeed, they in turn carry our values forward, connecting deeply with our guests and creating the memorable experiences that Four Seasons is known for."⁴²

—
*Ed Evans, Executive VP and CHRO,
Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts*

³⁹ Journal of Applied Psychology ⁴⁰ Insider, CNBC, Airbnb

⁴¹ International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health ⁴² Forbes, PR Newswire

- In 2015, French biscuit manufacturer, Poult, reported that in the nine years following their organisation-wide efforts to build an entrepreneurial culture “that encourages employee involvement and empowerment”, **revenue increased** 33 per cent to 210 million Euros.⁴³
- In the 2012 book, *Employee Involvement and Total Quality Management: Practices and Results in Fortune 1000 Companies*, Edward Lawler et. al. reported that Trader Joe's, an American retail food chain, found that “more employee empowerment was accompanied by an increase in annual **sales growth** from 15 per cent to 26 per cent... In addition, sales volume increased more than 500 per cent over an eight-year period.”⁴⁴

Empowering people for better outcomes

The Example of Diabetes

Jorgo Chatzimarkakis, Member of the European Parliament, 2010

“The changing role of patients towards increased self-responsibility in the management of their own condition is particularly evident in the case of diabetes, in particular type 2 diabetes.

The evolution of diabetes from a serious and potentially fatal disease to a manageable chronic condition would not have been possible without patients gaining the knowledge and capability to count carbohydrates, administer insulin, adjust their lifestyle, and maintain their motivation and discipline every single day of their life.

A breakthrough in this century-long process was achieved with the introduction of self-monitoring

of blood glucose (SMBG) in the 1970s, freeing patients from the need for regular hospitalizations or consultations...

Empowering people with diabetes to self-monitor their blood glucose has proven effective not only for the individual patient but also for the health system as a whole...

The equation is simple but compelling: The costs of treating diabetes increase with the incidence of secondary complications, which trigger the need for hospitalization, emergency care, and treatment by a specialist.

The risk of secondary complications can be reduced effectively by managing diabetes on a daily basis and putting an empowered patient into the center of a well-structured management plan, as recommended in international guidelines.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Journal of Business Research ⁴⁴ Academy of Management Perspectives ⁴⁵ Journal of Diabetes Science and Technology

Why is active care the next big trend in employee wellbeing?

Wellbeing leaders know that when an employee is safe, happy, and healthy, they are more likely to be motivated, collaborative, and productive at work.⁴⁶

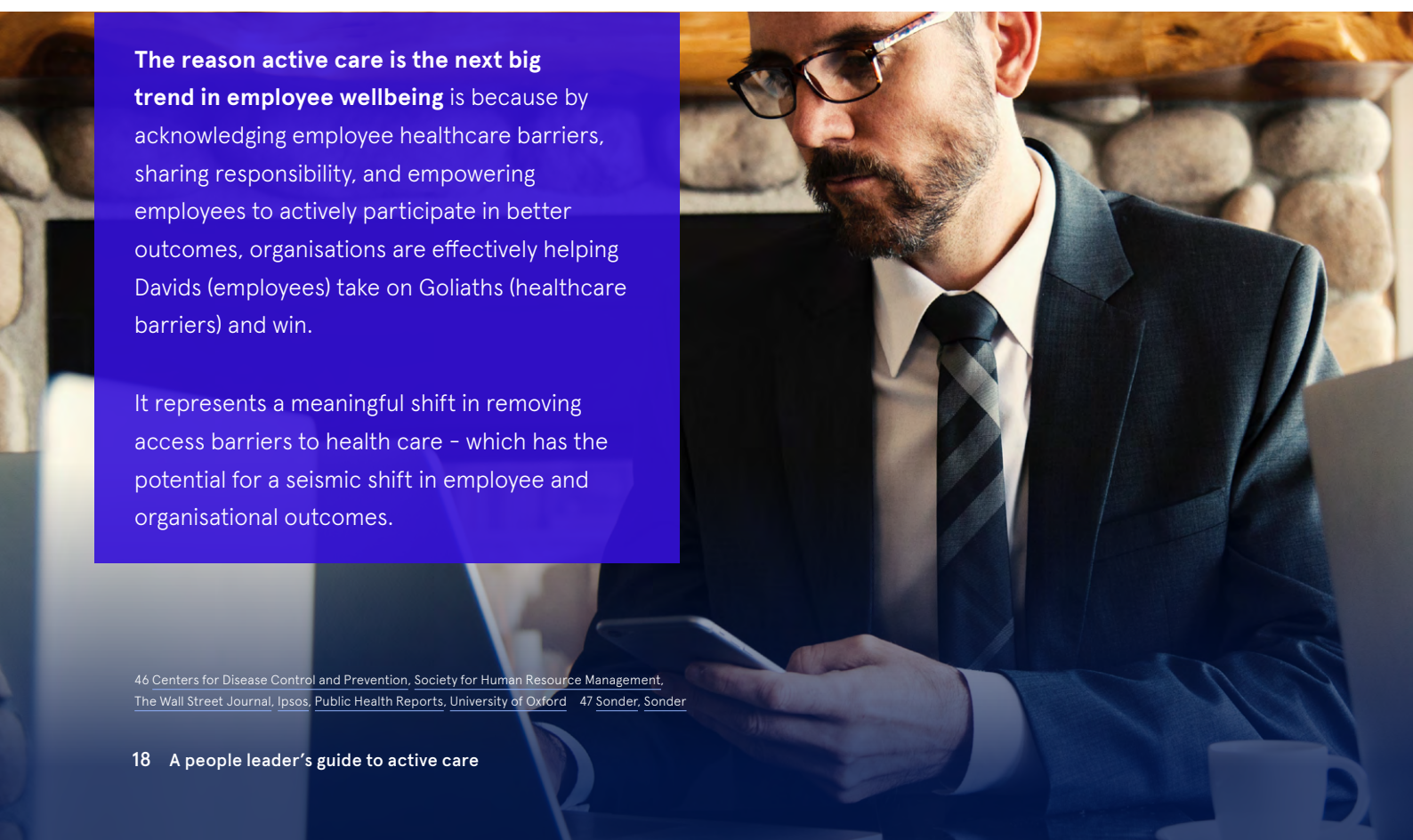
The problem is most leaders have been able to deliver short-term happiness but not long-term healthiness. This is primarily because:

- They haven't understood the complexity of employee health;⁴⁷ and
- Beyond EAPs, their organisations haven't shared the responsibility for employee access to health care.

The reason active care is the next big trend in employee wellbeing is because by acknowledging employee healthcare barriers, sharing responsibility, and empowering employees to actively participate in better outcomes, organisations are effectively helping Davids (employees) take on Goliaths (healthcare barriers) and win.

It represents a meaningful shift in removing access barriers to health care - which has the potential for a seismic shift in employee and organisational outcomes.

46 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Society for Human Resource Management, The Wall Street Journal, Ipsos, Public Health Reports, University of Oxford 47 Sonder, Sonder

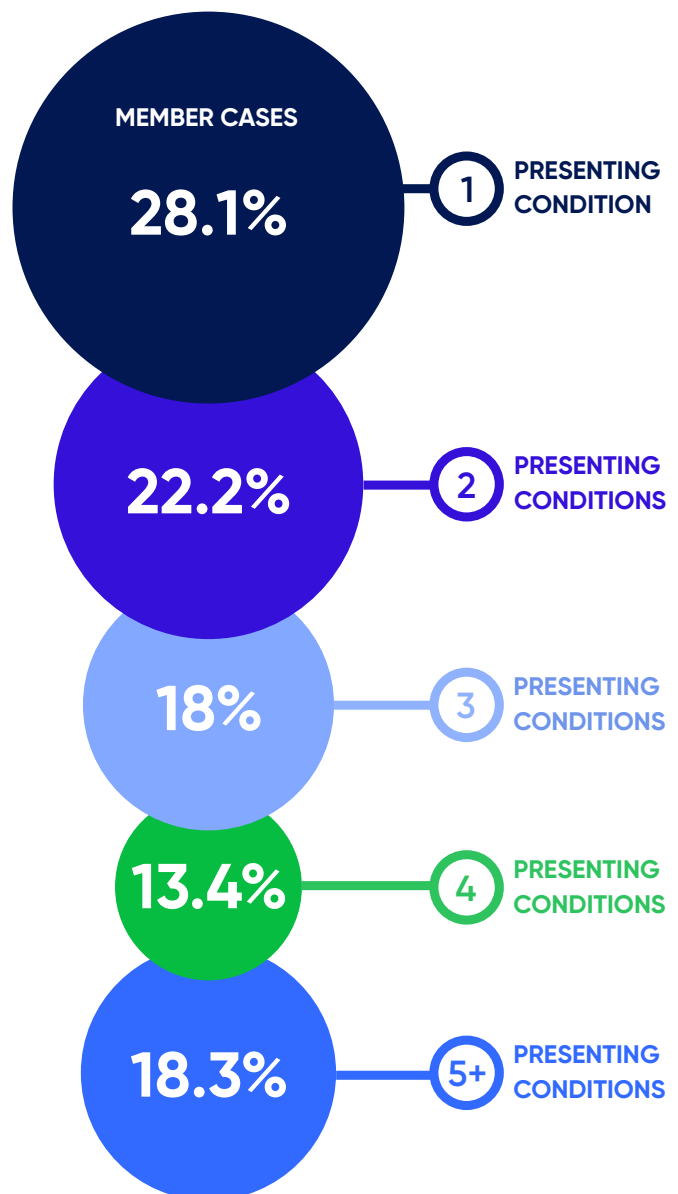


Health complexity

In our sample of 10,000+ member support cases from July to September 2022, we found that 71.9 per cent of members presented with more than one wellbeing issue, and nearly one in five people had five or more presenting conditions.⁴⁸

This meant that most people (who reached out for support) were contending with multiple, intertwined challenges, with the impact compounded for each challenge.

To illustrate how varied those concerns were, our data shows that from January to September 2022, our clinical team (including registered nurses and specialist physicians) diagnosed more than 100 distinct medical diagnoses.⁴⁹



⁴⁸ Sonder ⁴⁹ Sonder

Benefits



For employees

- Improved health and safety behaviours and outcomes
- Greater wellbeing at work
- Increased job productivity
- Reduced need for sick leave or workers' compensation
- Less inclination to quit due to poor personal wellbeing
- Improved life and work satisfaction



For organisations

- Higher wellbeing and engagement rates
- Reduced absenteeism, presenteeism, workers' compensation claims, and payments to substitute workers
- Improved culture, retention, and ability to attract talent
- Improved productivity and quality of work/product/service
- Strengthened reputation and resilience

Next steps



For organisations

- Acknowledge that employees need help to access immediate, convenient, and affordable care
- Commit to sharing the responsibility of employee access to wellbeing care
- Empower employees with relevant tools and resources so they can access care when they need it
- Encourage active employee participation in their health behaviours and improved wellbeing outcomes
- Ensure active care is advocated from the top of the organisation, and wellbeing leaders are supported in their endeavours



For wellbeing leaders

- Cultivate a culture of active care and encourage employees to actively participate in their health solutions
- Help managers promote positive wellbeing and design jobs for wellbeing - not just productivity and ROI
- Help managers understand the impact of poor wellbeing and recognise early warning signs
- Help managers be mindful of health complexity, given that many people are dealing with intertwined health challenges, and each person responds to wellbeing concerns differently

Summary

Active care is a proactive way to improve employee wellbeing and business performance.

For an employer, it's a way to proactively enable and empower people to get the care they need, when and how they need it, so they are more engaged and productive at work.

For employees, it's a way to actively participate in, and feel in control of, the wellbeing solutions that help them stay safe and well.

Based on a model of shared responsibility for physical and mental wellbeing, an active care culture is a high-performance culture - full of healthy employees who are happy with their wellbeing and actively contributing to positive business outcomes.



About us

Sonder is an active care technology company that helps organisations improve the wellbeing of their people so they perform at their best.

Our mobile app provides immediate, 24/7 support from a team of safety, medical, and mental health professionals - plus onsite help for time-sensitive scenarios.

Accredited by the Australian Council on Healthcare Standards (ACHS), our platform gives leaders the insights they need to act on tomorrow's wellbeing challenges today.



Immediate assessment

Chat with a Sonder care specialist in 15 seconds or less - day or night



In-person response

Get on-the-ground assistance so you're not alone in difficult times



Sonder specialists

Access our clinical team of registered nurses, doctors, psychologists, and more



Wellbeing resources

Build a happier, healthier you - in just a few minutes a day



Safety scanning

Avoid unsafe situations and outcomes before they arise

Care in your hands

Let's connect



sonder.io

