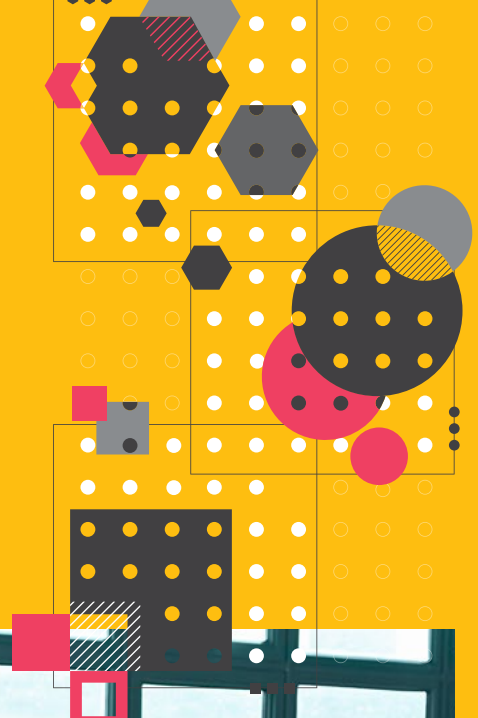
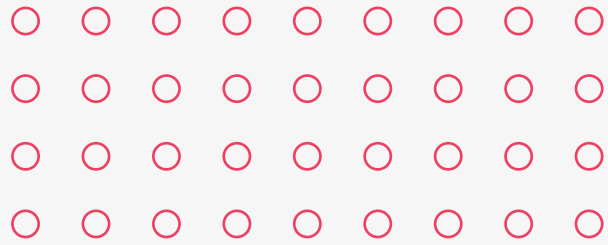


Rethinking workplace mental health and wellbeing

How to keep people well, engaged
and productive in a new world of work



Foreword



Workplaces have changed beyond recognition over the past two years. Expedited by COVID-19, we have become more digitally enabled, embraced newfound flexibility through hybrid working, introduced new on-site safety measures to enable lockdown restrictions to be lifted, and there has been a greater emphasis on the wellbeing of employees as we navigate the blurred lines between our personal and professional lives.

So, how do leaders keep their people well, engaged and productive?

It's a significant challenge. The University of Sydney's Brain and Mind Centre estimated the productivity cost of the pandemic¹ at \$20 billion a year due to projected increases in psychological distress, hospitalisations, and suicide. They later added another \$1 billion to that estimation, after mid-year lockdowns in Sydney and Melbourne. The real costs are higher. Mental ill health affects not only an individual, but their entire community² of colleagues, friends and family. It's difficult for anyone to perform at their full potential when they are worried about, caring for, or taking on extra duties for someone else. School closures, job uncertainty and extended restrictions haven't helped.

Employees are increasingly looking to their employers³ for better mental health support, as part of a broader pandemic-accelerated transformation in the future of work⁴. Millennials in particular want their employers to implement additional mental health initiatives - 87 per cent compared to 67 per cent of baby boomers.⁵

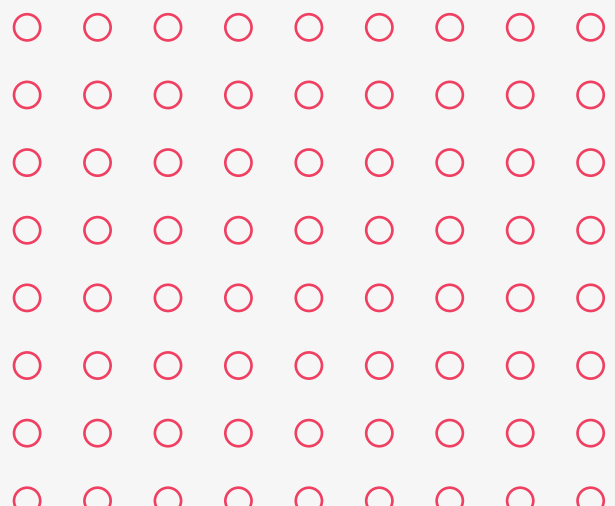
Early-stage support boosts productivity and participation by reducing absenteeism and presenteeism, returning people to work sooner, and reducing employee turnover. Yet, few organisations review the relevance and effectiveness of their workplace supports.

Duty of care for workplace psychological health and safety is also evolving. This is demonstrated by the May 2021 implementation of a code of practice for managing psychosocial hazards at work⁶ in NSW, and the June 2021 publication of the world's first international standard for mental health in the workplace (ISO 45003⁷).

Eighty per cent⁸ of Australia's top 500 companies have Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) in place. Yet these programs are typically underused and undervalued, with sometimes only five per cent⁹ of employees using them. This can lead to delays in care, as well as a protraction of costs related to lost productivity and participation.¹⁰

With so much ongoing change, many existing workplace support systems are no longer fit for purpose. This is hardly surprising when the very nature of workplaces has changed so much in such a short space of time. Employers need to be designing human-centred approaches to offering preventative support and earlier interventions, as well as collecting data insights (whilst preserving privacy) to inform ongoing effort and investment.

The good news is that most large Australian employers are recognising the benefits of supporting workplace mental health and exploring more sophisticated support models and programs. This is due largely to years of internal advocacy from HR, wellbeing, compliance, risk, and workplace health and safety teams. Leadership buy-in, an essential ingredient of success, is also on the rise.



Similarly, workers' compensation schemes have recognised the benefits of investing in prevention and early intervention to minimise future impacts of spiralling costs associated with psychological injury in the workplace.

To coincide with the federal government's historic \$2.3 billion investment¹¹ in mental health and suicide prevention, workplaces are being viewed as key settings to broaden reach and impact, of evidence-based support for mental health and wellbeing.

Redesigning and adopting more contemporary approaches to generating demand, reducing barriers to entry, and building mental health literacy will be key to driving change.

Proactively reviewing the reasons for the current low usage of support options is an important first step.

We explore **three key reasons** for the suboptimal uptake of workplace mental health support: it's not built into the culture; solutions are not the right fit; and poor past experiences.

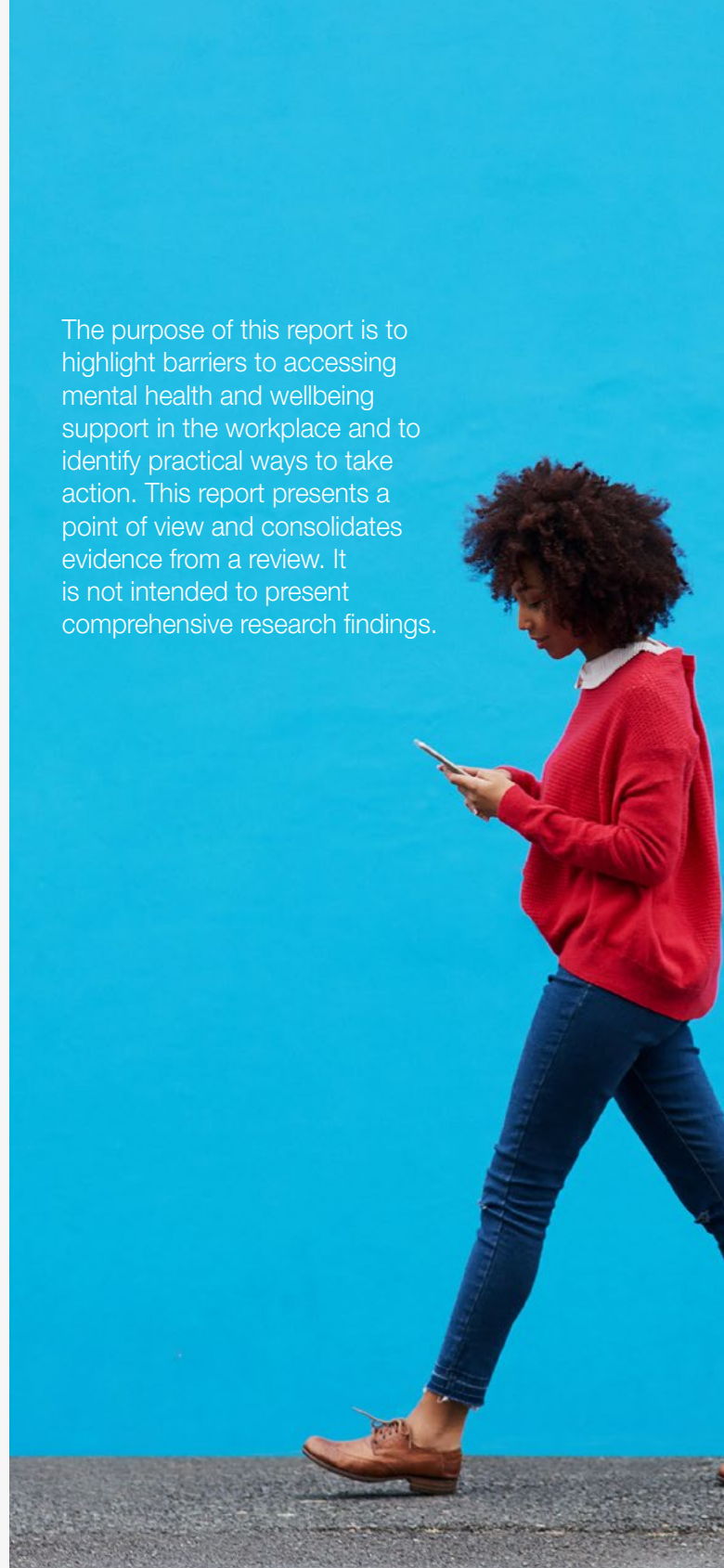


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Dr Sharon Ponniah
Partner, Health
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Australia

The purpose of this report is to highlight barriers to accessing mental health and wellbeing support in the workplace and to identify practical ways to take action. This report presents a point of view and consolidates evidence from a review. It is not intended to present comprehensive research findings.



1 <https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/latest-lockdowns-add-1b-to-mental-health-shadow-pandemic-20210822-p58kuz>

2 <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/determinants-of-health>

3 <https://hbr.org/2019/10/research-people-want-their-employers-to-talk-about-mental-health>

4 <https://www.pwc.com.au/important-problems/future-of-work-design-for-the-future/changing-places-hybrid-working.html>

5 https://www.allianz.com.au/images/internet/allianz-au/Content/Images/Allianz_Future%20Thriving%20Workplaces%20report.pdf

6 <https://www.safework.nsw.gov.au/resource-library/list-of-all-codes-of-practice/codes-of-practice/managing-psycho-social-hazards-at-work>

7 <https://www.iso.org/standard/64283.html>

8 <https://www.ibisworld.com/au/industry/employee-assistance-program-services/5439/>

9 <https://www.ibisworld.com/au/industry/employee-assistance-program-services/5439/>

10 <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report/mental-health.pdf>


11 <https://www.health.gov.au/news/budgets-historic-23-billion-investment-in-mental-health-and-suicide-prevention>



01

Reason 1

Not built into the culture



One in five Australians will experience a mental health challenge at some point in their lives. We expect this statistic to be exacerbated by a range of pandemic-related factors¹² including isolation, social distancing, restricted movement, sudden job loss, homeschooling and lockdown uncertainty. All of which impacts employee wellbeing and the ability to be productive.

However, most employees do not use workplace support programs because it is not built into the culture - there is a barrier to access, and a stigma around it.

Awareness and accessibility

When employees need mental health support, few know how or where to access it¹³, even when workplaces have these supports in place. The range of options available can be complex and disjointed, leaving employees wondering, “which one is right for me?”.

This low ongoing awareness is illustrated by a 2020 survey¹⁴ of frontline doctors at a tertiary care hospital in NSW. The 235 responses showed that more than 50 per cent of doctors did not know how to access their own EAP.

> 50% of frontline hospital doctors did not know how to access their own EAP.

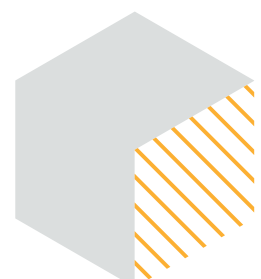
Stigma and discrimination

Seventy-four per cent¹⁵ of Australians who are living with a mental illness have experienced stigma.

Australian workers are often subject to stigma and discrimination when they experience a mental health challenge, access support, and return to work. This is because the ability to have meaningful mental health conversations is not built into the culture. RUOK posters, combined with lunchroom talk about yoga and mindfulness apps, is not enough.

This is exacerbated by a lack of understanding by those around them. Most colleagues and managers have not received mental health first aid training, or more basic skills training to know what signs to look for, how to ask the right questions, or support with compassion an employee experiencing challenges.

An integrated approach to mental health in the workplace¹⁶ should connect all business functions. Work health and safety (WHS), people and culture, information technology, operations, and all other functions should work together in a strategic, holistic approach. Complement this by building skills for empathy, emotional intelligence, diversity and inclusion, mental health and wellbeing support, as well as visible role modelling and a culture of accountability.





If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got.

Henry Ford

Reducing stigma and driving cultural change requires visible commitment from the top. Business leaders need to encourage open and honest conversations without fear of retribution or disadvantage. Leaders who show vulnerability and tell their own stories also create safe spaces for others to speak up and feel heard. This can have a positive impact on trust and engagement and “goes a long way toward reducing the stigma¹⁷ and setting the tone for transparency”.

12 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mental-health-services/mental-health-services-in-australia/report-contents/mental-health-impact-of-covid-19#mental-health>

13 <https://www.headsup.org.au/docs/default-source/resources/bl1270-report---tns-the-state-of-mental-health-in-australian-workplaces-hr.pdf?sfvrsn=8>

14 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/imj.15465>

15 https://www.sane.org/images/PDFs/ALifeWithoutStigma_A_SANE_Report.pdf

16 https://www.utas.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/972395/WHW-Network-White-Paper.pdf

17 <https://hbr.org/2019/10/research-people-want-their-employers-to-talk-about-mental-health>

Actions

- Improve mental health education and awareness of support options.
- Simplify access, for easy entry points when employees are vulnerable.
- Foster open, regular and meaningful discussions about mental health.
- Encourage the sharing of lived experiences, including from executives.
- Empower managers to practice empathy, display vulnerability, and stimulate cultural change.



02

Reason 2

Solutions are not the right fit

Many workplace mental health supports are still reliant on traditional EAPs and a one-size-fits-all model, despite a growing expectation for more contemporary services that are better suited to employee needs, modern job design, and industry challenges.

Modern offerings encourage proactive prevention and early intervention. They offer flexibility, professional support, and involve consultation with employees and stakeholders to redesign the whole experience to support people better.

Prevention and early intervention

Getting help early can have a significant positive impact¹⁸ on mental health. Yet, some workplace support programs focus only on crisis support. They act as safety nets for late stage mental ill health, rather than as enablers of wellness and good health.

A key element of early intervention is building trust. But it is not unusual for employees to distrust support services funded by their employer¹⁹ because they worry about their privacy and confidentiality being breached. Organisations need to provide a range of options that enable employees to select what is right for them. This includes having options that allow employees to remain anonymous when seeking help, guidance to find specific support (e.g. alcohol dependence) and practical ways to engage their manager and employer as part of this (e.g. how to have a conversation to ask for help at work).

Modern support programs create ways to build trust earlier in the health care journey. For example, via digital self-help tools, timely alerts and nudges, and invitations for employees to chat before they hit breaking point. These stepping stones can build trust gradually by providing a warmer and earlier path to help - facilitating better and more equitable outcomes.



We need mental health prevention and intervention to be like fluoride in the water - it needs to be everywhere²⁰.

Rudd and Beidas

Anytime, anywhere

Traditional support services require employees to phone and book a deep-dive appointment with a counsellor or psychologist. “This is the last thing that people needing mental health support feel like doing,” says Dr Jamie Phillips, Sonder’s Medical Director and Head of Member Support.

“Today’s tech-savvy generations prefer digital in the first instance because it is less confronting and is available when and where they need it. Ninety-one per cent of our members submit their initial enquiry via chat. Only nine per cent call us.”

Work environments are not the same. Construction and manufacturing workers for example, as well as frontline retail and health workers, find it difficult to leave their workplace to travel to in-person appointments. Working parents struggle as well, especially if they are temporarily homeschooling and have no other childcare options.

Employees in hybrid working environments also want the flexibility to access care whenever and wherever it's needed, as well as a variety of entry points and channels to engage with support.

Web chat functions, web forums, and curated self-help content all offer flexible, easy ways for employees to reach out for support.

91% of Sonder members prefer digital chat. Only 9% call.

Professional help

Digital solutions offer enormous potential to provide initial guidance and help join the dots. However, most issues are multilayered and require health professionals to ensure robust clinical governance and escalation pathways are followed. Human support can more effectively identify, understand, and help manage these complexities for each individual over time.

“Around 51 per cent of Sonder’s support cases are caused by something other than the issue stated. For example, self-diagnosed financial stress, with further triage, might uncover a need for urgent safety support for domestic violence, plus mental health support for isolation, depression, and suicide ideation,” says Dr Phillips.

Hence why “digital interventions with the highest levels of engagement are those that include some form of human interaction,” say Rudd and Beidas²¹ from the Center for Mental Health, Department of Psychiatry, Perelman School of Medicine, at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

18 <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/mental-health/prevention-and-promotion/early-intervention-in-mental-health>

19 <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/winter2019/pages/companies-look-to-boost-low-usage-of-employee-assistance-programs.aspx>

20 <https://mental.jmir.org/2020/6/e18472>

21 <https://mental.jmir.org/2020/6/e18472>

22 <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/tools-and-resources/best-practice-guides/consultation-and-cooperation-in-the-workplace>

23 <https://www.thriveatwork.org.au/resources/thrive-at-work-case-study-fifo-workers/>

24 <https://www.pwc.com.au/consulting/assets/future-of-work.pdf>

51% of Sonder’s support cases are caused by something other than the self-diagnosed issue.

Consultation

Fair Work Commission advice²² says that better decisions are made when employees have input. A right-fit workplace support program should consult employees and stakeholders to develop programs relevant for each organisation, workforce, industry, and operating environment.

For example, compared to benchmark groups, fly-in fly-out (FIFO) workers²³ experience higher levels of psychological distress, burnout, drug and alcohol usage, suicide ideation, and poorer sleep quality. They are also more likely to experience or witness bullying in the workplace. These factors are important to consider when designing workplace supports in this industry.

Future of work frameworks²⁴ suggest going beyond program consultation. Long-term workforce strategy should involve the co-creation of redesigned work experiences and supports, which are holistic, human centred and informed by lived experience.

Actions

- Redesign workplace supports if they are not responsive to today’s needs.
- Create inclusive and safe environments to expedite both prevention and early intervention.
- Provide flexible options to engage with support as and where needed.
- Consider offering both digital and human-backed support layers.
- Invest time in employee and stakeholder consultation.



03

Reason 3

Poor past experiences

Sixty-nine per cent of employees²⁵ would turn down a promotion in favour of their mental health and wellbeing, according to a recent survey conducted by PwC and Atlassian.

In a different survey, 50 per cent of Millennials and 75 per cent of Gen Zers²⁶ had left roles in the past for mental health reasons, either voluntarily or involuntarily.

Yet, poor past experiences are deterring employees from future use²⁷ of workplace support programs. This is often due to concerns around quality, and delays in care.

Quality concerns

There are limited independent studies²⁸ in Australia that assess EAP effectiveness and return on investment (ROI). This is likely due to strict confidentiality requirements, a lack of sophisticated data insights, and an absence of alternative offerings for comparison.

Anecdotally, HR managers and functional leads report mixed results from their EAPs. Some employees say they benefitted. Some say they did not.

The Productivity Commission Inquiry Report 2020²⁹ recommended that minimum standards be developed for EAPs, and for the evaluation of these programs.

The report also recommended that employers work with Safe Work Australia to share evidence about employer-initiated mental health interventions, to “help all employers choose the most appropriate intervention for their workplace”.

Privacy

Program feedback is important to help improve the appropriateness and accessibility of support and services, but information must always be visible about what and why data is collected. Quality assurance processes are key to ensuring that the appropriate mechanisms are in place to protect data and use it responsibly.

It is important for employees to preserve their anonymity when seeking information about mental health support through the workplace. People want to know they cannot be identified, treated differently or disadvantaged in any way. Guided steps towards information should include transparent information about privacy and confidentiality, to build trust in the experience.

Delays in care

A number of factors impede access to mental health care in Australia. These include: disproportionate distribution of health professionals by geography; complexity of needs; system and service fragmentation; out of pocket costs; and long wait lists. The pandemic has placed extra pressure on demand, with anecdotal reports of growing wait lists as long as nine months.³⁰

When employees need help, they need it now. Not tomorrow and not in three weeks. Poor past experiences (e.g. waiting on hold for more than an hour, needing to call back tomorrow, or joining a wait queue for in-person care) result in delays to care and discourage future use.

25 <https://www.atlassian.com/dam/jcr:f6042f00-801c-40c7-9873-8646165402ad/return-on-action-aus.pdf>

26 <https://www.mindsharepartners.org/mentalhealthatworkreport>

27 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03069880802088937?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

28 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/1744-7941.12124>

29 <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report/mental-health-volume1.pdf>

30 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-17/waitlist-for-mental-health-appointments-amid-sharp-rise-in-need/13253612>



Forty-eight per cent of Sonder members reach out for mental health support after business hours. That's one in two people whose needs would not be met and whose lives might not be saved without a 24/7 service.

Dr Phillips

Actions

- Embed quality assurance checks into reporting and feedback processes.
- Openly discuss continuous opportunities for continuous improvement support program providers.
- Share evidence and learnings more broadly to build communities of practice.
- Provide choice and variety to enable employees to access the help they need when they need it.



Summary

Low employee uptake of workplace mental health support has largely been accepted with minimal inquiry. This impasse carries a business and societal risk because it means Australians are not receiving essential and timely care.

With our nation still in the grips of a pandemic, now is the perfect opportunity for organisations to take bold and immediate action that meaningfully increases usage and improves workplace mental health outcomes.

Improving employee engagement with workplace mental health programs starts with getting the culture right. Organisations must commit to reducing stigma and discrimination, boosting awareness and accessibility, empowering their people, building trust, and more proactively facilitating uptake and engagement.

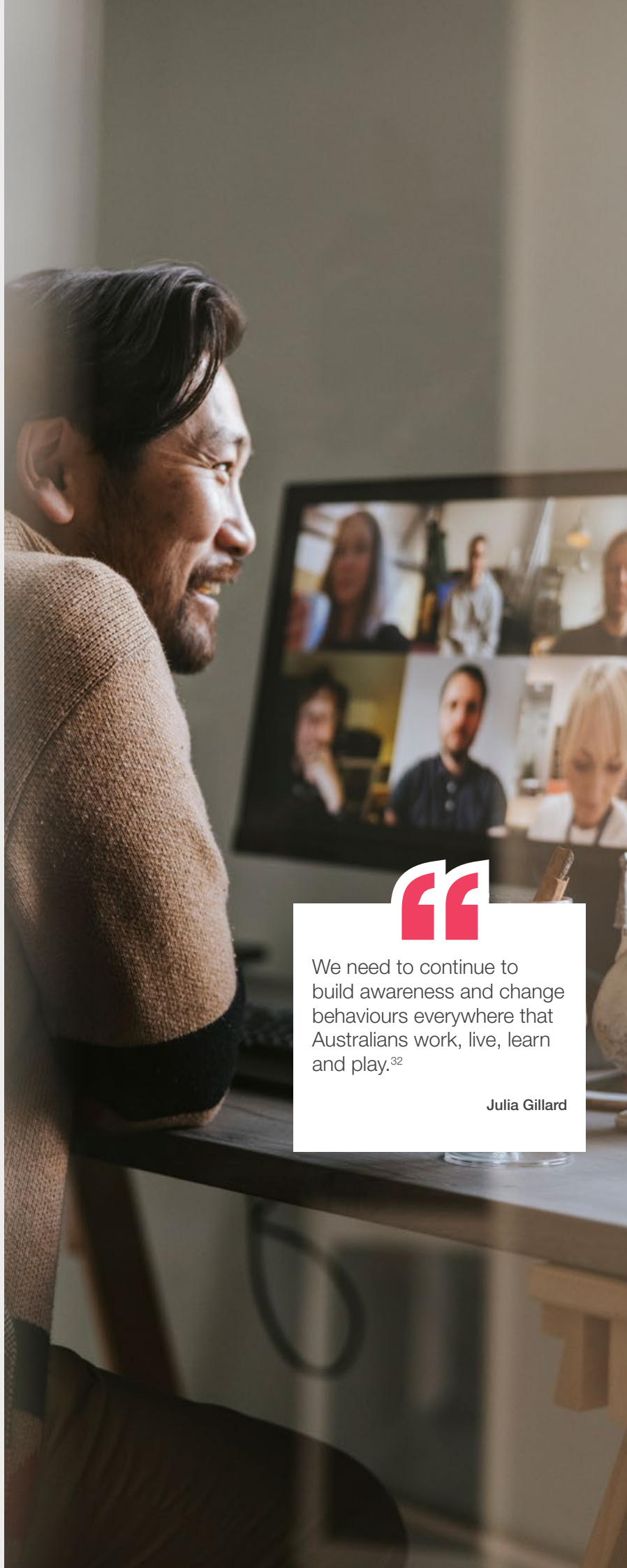
It's crucial to offer the right mix of support services, for employees to access whenever and wherever needed. And, it needs to include 21st century solutions, paired with human support.

In consultation with employees and stakeholders, organisations should review current programs to ensure relevance, and measure impact.

If organisations aspire to be agents of change and resilience in the long term, it's time for leaders and influencers to stop reading alarming Lifeline statistics³¹ from the sidelines, and start disrupting the status quo of mental health support.

³¹ <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/suicide-line-records-highest-number-of-calls-in-history/news-story/ef093c574143611c4b9f997aed0097dd>

³² https://www.dca.org.au/media-releases/hon-julia-gillard-workplaces-need-embrace-mental-health-di?__cf_chl_managed_tk__=pmd_j9jqGymSKbk0skimFd7sanuHIAxxQSfV/Eru923HtfHQ-1634187756-0-gqNtZGzNA2WjcnBszQdR



We need to continue to build awareness and change behaviours everywhere that Australians work, live, learn and play.³²

Julia Gillard

About PwC

PwC Australia, is a Professional Services firm comprising more than 8,000 people who work towards building trust in society and solving important problems. In Australia alone, the firm delivers quality in audit, assurance, consulting and tax services to more than 5,000 clients, and forms part of a network of firms in 158 countries with over 250,000 people. PwC Australia strongly believes that positive mental health begins with an open and inclusive culture. Being involved with the Green Light to Talk Movement, establishing the National Health and Wellbeing Practice, and engaging in ongoing work with a range of Strategic Partners are a few of the many initiatives that PwC Australia is currently undertaking as a step towards creating their own mentally healthy workplace and better supporting their clients to do the same.

pwc.com.au

About Sonder

Sonder is a leading wellbeing and safety company which services around 400,000 eligible members, principally across Australia and New Zealand. Accredited by the Australian Council on Healthcare Standards (ACHS), Sonder's solution is a technology-driven platform supported by 24/7 safety, medical, and mental health experts. Sonder's qualified team help with a very broad spectrum of member concerns, from stress and anxiety, to depression and suicide prevention, to family breakdowns and domestic violence, to workplace bullying and frontline manager support, and more. This is backed up by a physical responder network that can be onsite within 20 minutes for time-sensitive scenarios such as workplace aggression and injuries, domestic violence and accidents, suicide ideations, welfare checks, hospital escorts, car breakdowns, and more. At the company's heart lies Sonder's wellbeing model, as well as a capability to deliver unique and timely data insights which drive meaningful business decisions. Sonder's model was recognised as a winning innovation in the 2021 AFR BOSS Most Innovative Companies awards.

sonder.io



We are on a mission to reimagine safety and wellbeing for employees - breaking down barriers for staff to reach out for help, and providing the right support at the right time.

Craig Cowdrey, CEO, Sonder

Rethinking workplace

mental health

and wellbeing

