

Sonder Insights

Customer aggression

The risk to employees and businesses

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In 2024, frontline workers are facing customer aggression more frequently.

This report examines rising hostility across multiple customer-facing industries in the UK and shares Sonder product data that supports this trend.

We also consider the impact this is having on both individuals and businesses, sharing evidence that suggests that people in customer-facing roles are more likely to take unplanned days off.

Discover expert commentary on strategies to reduce the ripple effect of customer aggression and threatening behaviour in this guide to frontline worker safety.

Section 1.0

The rise in customer aggression

Customer aggression is on the rise.

According to the British Retail Consortium's [2024 crime survey](#), there has been a

50%

YOY increase in violence and abuse against shop workers from 2021-2022 to 2022-2023.

87%

of retailers surveyed placed violence in their top three threats for the next two years.

With nearly

68%

placing it as number one, ahead of customer theft and fraud.

Helen Dickinson, Chief Executive of the BRC said that "despite retailers investing huge sums in crime prevention, violence and abuse against retail workers is climbing."

Total incident increase from 2016-17 to 2022-23

Incidents of violence and abuse per day	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Violence with injury per day	51	30	23	30	21	29	115
Violence without injury per day	75	85	78	84	104	116	115
Abusive behaviour per day	224	273	323	341	1176	721	1191
Total incidents of violence or abuse per day	350	388	424	455	1301	867	1306

Source: British Retail Consortium's 2024 crime survey

Since the pandemic and subsequent increases in cost of living pressures, UK retailers have shared stories revealing a surge in customer aggression. In 2023, the Co-op reported soaring levels of retail crime, explaining it had hit record levels in their stores, increasing by more than one third over the past year. According to the chain, there were about 1,000 cases of crime, shoplifting and anti-social behaviour in its shops every day in the six months from January – June 2023.

Zarah, a store manager in East London, said: "I have spent 20 years at Co-op, and it is worse now than ever before. We call the police, and have been told to call '101'. It is being normalised, but colleagues are terrified, and their families are worried for them everyday they come into work."

While sharing these statistics, the Co-op called for an "urgent change" from the police, warning: "This level of out-of-control crime is unsustainable and could even see some communities become a no-go area for local stores."



"I think it's really important that we understand that this issue is worsening, not getting better."

Nick Davison - Managing Director, Myadv1ce
(former Head of Health & Wellbeing, John Lewis Partnership)

Other supermarkets, including Tesco and Aldi, have begun to roll out body-worn cameras to protect their staff from similar incidents, and have echoed the need for urgent change. Tesco Group's CEO Ken Murphy called for an update to the law to make abuse or violence towards retail workers an offence across the UK, saying: "I want those who break the law in our stores brought to book."



"After a long campaign by retailers and the union Usdaw, last year the Government made attacking shop workers an aggravating factor in convictions – meaning offenders should get longer sentences. Judges should make use of this power. But we need to go further, as in Scotland, and make abuse or violence towards retail workers an offence in itself."

Ken Murphy - CEO, Tesco Group

In an open letter organised by the Institute of Customer Service, more than 50 businesses including John Lewis and the Post Office, as well as several MPs, urged the government to ensure assaults on shop workers were better recorded.

A prevalent problem across multiple industries

Customer hostility isn't a retail-only issue. Employees working in hospitality, call centres and delivery companies are also at risk, among others. There were reports of multiple incidents at KFC restaurants around the UK in 2023, and incidents involving airline staff are also reportedly on the rise.

In September 2022 Sonder collected insights from 1,500 employees in the UK, across a range of different industries. The survey found that

28%

of employees had been threatened or assaulted in public, with many saying they lacked personal safety support.

59%

of employees said they did not have access to personal safety, tools and benefits.

Nor is this UK-only issue. A 2023 Sonder survey* found that

75%

of Australians and New Zealand employees in customer-facing roles experienced customer aggression

25%

experienced it weekly or more.

*Source: September 2023, McGregor Tan survey of employees in Australia and New Zealand who were working a minimum of 30 hours per week.

What Sonder product data tells us

This trend is supported by Sonder customer data, covering the hundreds of thousands employees to which Sonder provides medical, safety and mental health support.

From 2022 - 2023, Sonder recorded 114% more 'critical incidents' year-on-year. Critical incidents are defined as 'a workplace event that has the potential to cause trauma to team members who have experienced or witnessed the event'. Not only are more of these critical incidents being recorded, the severity is also increasing. More incidents now involve a police incident, victim of assault/violence or a safety concern.

In 2022,

28%

of critical incidents involved a police incident, victim assault or violence or a safety concern.

In 2023 that rose to

32%

This number looks set to rise further.

In January this year

40%

of critical incidents recorded involved a police incident, victim assault/violence or a safety concern.

That's a

16%

increase vs the same period in January 2023.

90% of critical incidents reported to Sonder occurred within skilled-based workforces, which include customer-facing roles in the retail trade, accommodation and food services, transport and postal services.



"We're seeing more incidents in the retail and hospitality space involving the police and emergency services, which indicates a heightened level of danger and potential trauma for the employees involved."

Casey Doyle - Critical Incident Manager, Sonder



What's causing this aggression?

In previous years, retail and hospitality leaders have pointed to the pandemic and its restrictions as a catalyst for a rise in threatening behaviour from customers.

Now in 2024, the pressure of the high cost of living is thought to be a contributing factor. In a recent [Sonder webinar](#), Nick Davison, Managing Director at Myadv1ce, former John Lewis Partnership Head of Health & Wellbeing, noted that these financial pressures have worsened customer hostility.



"I think COVID was the start of a behavioural change and the cost of living crisis has exacerbated that."

Nick Davison - Managing Director, Myadv1ce
(former Head of Health & Wellbeing, John Lewis Partnership)

Kimi Powell, Director of Nursing at Sonder, joined Nick on the webinar and agreed that "with financial stress there's been an increase in verbal abuse and physical violence. It's become very day to day, and very normal, which isn't okay.

While they agreed the cost of living crisis was worsening the issue, there were other factors that made frontline workers more vulnerable to hostility, including isolation. Nick said: "There are a number of contributing factors. You've also got the changing nature of retail with the growth of convenience shops and smaller locations which have less people in them. Therefore less support or less peers and colleagues around you."

According to the British Retail Consortium [BRC 2024 crime survey](#): "Two common triggers for such attacks are asking for ID for age verification (where failure to carry out the check is a criminal offence for the employee but not for the perpetrator of an under-age sale) and stopping someone who is believed to be stealing goods (which as the survey shows is a key cost for retailers) in one of the 16.7 million incidents."

Great Britain's [Health and Safety Commission](#) list the following as the main factors that can lead to violent or aggressive behaviour and create a risk include:

- Inherent aggression or mental instability
- Impatience (due to waiting, lack of information or boredom)
- Frustration (due to lack of information or boredom)
- Anxiety (lack of choice, lack of space)
- Resentment (lack of rights)
- Alcohol and drugs
- Poor design of premises



Section 2.0

The impact on employees and businesses

Employees

Employees in customer-facing roles represent a vast, diverse subset of people. This widespread issue is impacting those in retail, hospitality, entertainment, health care, social assistance and more.

This true story from a Sonder member illustrates how customer aggression can impact both individuals and employers.

Sonder Member Story

A 22-year old retail worker had been verbally and physically assaulted by a customer at work. She reported the incident to her manager, who had asked her to take a 20-minute break and to call a support person. The manager stayed with the customer while the employee contacted Sonder.

Following the incident:

- The worker:
 - Wasn't eating or attending work as she didn't feel safe
 - Was experiencing consequent financial issues
 - Revealed that she had experienced sexual harassment by a customer at the same store six months earlier, and that the incidents had triggered her to restart using drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism
- The member's manager also sought support as they felt they had let the worker and wider team down
- The member's colleagues noted that she was struggling to come back to work, so their perception of workplace safety had also decreased



"This member needed support to get her back on track and back to work. But we also supported management so that they could improve on the culture in the workplace and also improve on their knowledge about mental health."

Louise Butler - Psychology Manager, Sonder

While Sonder was able to work with the member and manager to address these issues, it's clear the results of the incident were far reaching. The ripple effect of this incident was felt in the members personal life, professional life and the workplace as a whole.



Businesses

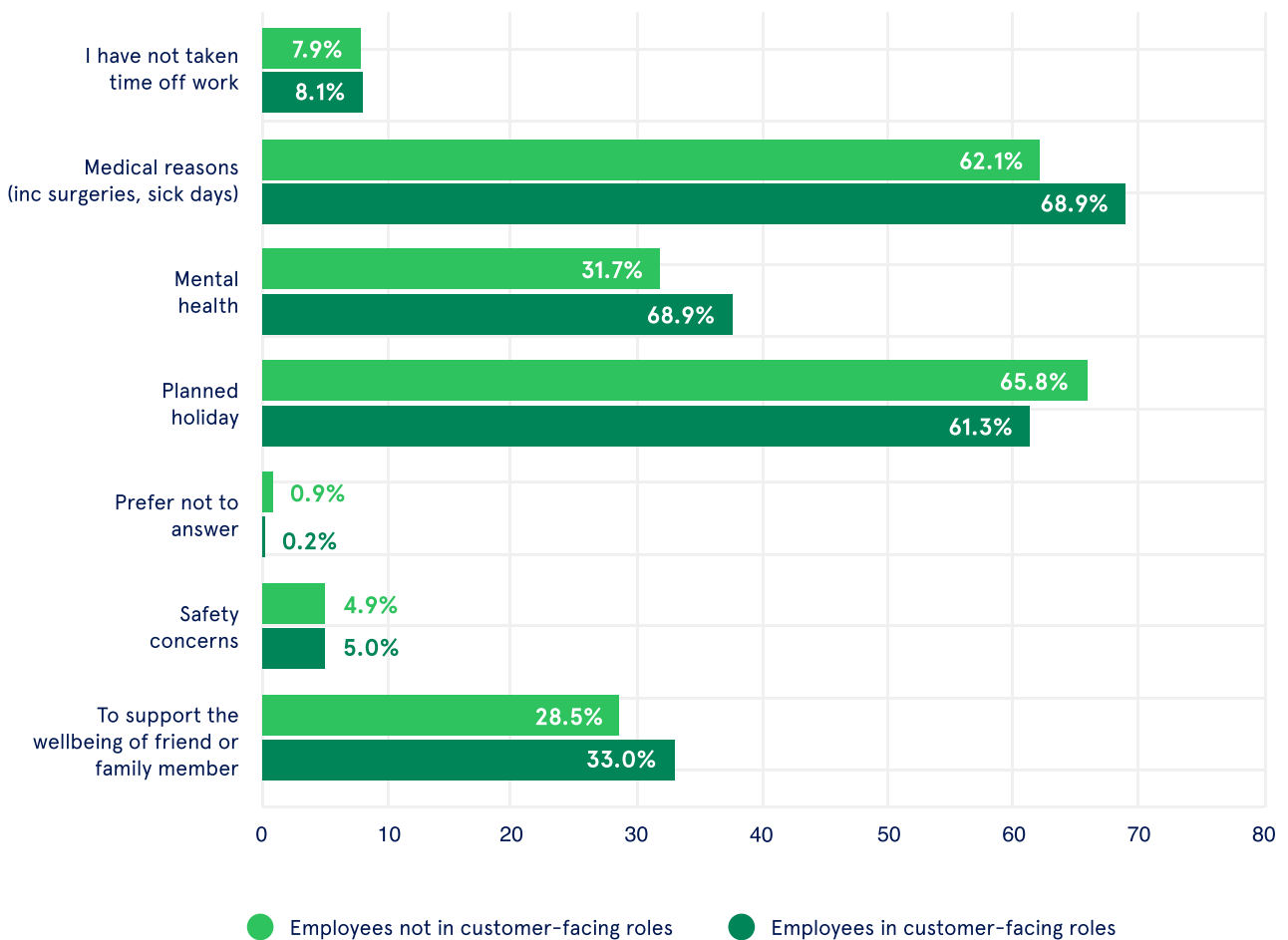
Absenteeism

According to a Sonder survey* employees in customer-facing roles are more likely to take unplanned days off than those who don't deal directly with customers or clients.

According to our survey, 68.9% of those in customer facing roles took time off work for medical reasons in the past twelve months, (vs 62.1% in the non customer facing cohort) and 37.6% took time off for mental health reasons (vs 31.7% in the non customer facing cohort).

*Source: September 2023, McGregor Tan survey of employees in Australia and New Zealand who were working a minimum of 30 hours per week.

In the past 12 months, have you taken time off work for any of the following reasons?



The issue of unplanned absence is as much of an issue in the UK as it is in Australia. Last year, the highest sickness absence rate was recorded for over a decade by the [CIPD Health and wellbeing at work report](#). The average rate of employee absence now stands at 7.8 days per employee per year.

According to 2023 figures from the Impact of Absence Calculator,

the total annual impact of absence per organisation in retail is

£2.16 million

and the value of lost productivity is

£1,299,334

This takes into account the direct costs of absence to organisations, such as lost working time and replacement worker fees, but also the hidden costs of poor workforce wellbeing that organisations often overlook. Its 'lost productivity' costing, for example, factors in time spent by managers administering absence, and the typical reduction in output from inexperienced replacement workers.



"We're getting daily calls from people who are getting assaulted in stores and that creates that sense of fear and insecurity among employees. People are telling us that they don't feel safe. They don't feel safe at work, they don't feel safe leaving work. They don't want to go to work."

Kimi Powell - Director of Nursing, Sonder



Another ripple effect of unplanned leave is the risk to a business' reputation. If shifts can't be covered, then services can't be performed adequately. A restaurant might lack the staff it needs to deliver high customer service. A delivery company might fail to deliver packages as promised. Both could attract customer complaints and potentially lead to more threatening behaviour.

Difficulty to hire

Companies or industries with a reputation for customer aggression may face staff shortages as they struggle to attract applicants to fill positions. In today's competitive job market, employees have more options than ever. If other industries offer similar pay and benefits without the risk of customer aggression, potential candidates are more likely to choose those alternatives.



"The implications for retailers and the hospitality businesses are really significant. It's already difficult to recruit in both those sectors. It will make it harder to attract people and keep them unless something is done about it."

Nick Davison - Managing Director, Myadv1ce
(former Head of Health & Wellbeing, John Lewis Partnership)

Section 3.0

**How businesses
can provide
much-needed
support**

What's standing in their way?

Businesses want to reduce the frequency and severity of customer aggression incidents and provide greater support to their teams. But two key challenges remain.

1. Providing nuanced care at scale

To fulfil workplace health and safety duties and mitigate psychosocial risk, businesses need to provide personalised care to their people, particularly following an incident of customer aggression. However, it's unlikely that leaders have the time or skills to provide the nuanced care needed at such scale. It's also possible that they might be struggling to cope with this aggression themselves.

Sometimes, threatening behaviour can even trigger complex issues for an employee, who will then need specialist, professional care.

2. 'The customer is always right'

This slogan is used as a motto by many well-meaning organisations looking to deliver excellent customer service. And as the prevalence of online reviews continues to grow, businesses are under pressure to keep their customers happy at all costs. This can make managers reluctant to side with staff when incidents with customers arise.



"Industry-wide, we need to challenge the notion that the customer is always right. At a certain point, a customer stops being a customer and starts becoming a risk."

Rebecca Goulter - Former Director of Marketing and Events,
National Retail Association

'Repeat offending' is still a significant issue for workers. To get on top of this, Nick Davison says that proactive measures need to be taken by businesses: "I think you need to do something as an organisation. Be proactive rather than sit on your hands and hope it's going to get better."

How businesses can provide support

Customer aggression can be traumatic. However it is a myth that all employees need psychological debriefing after a critical incident at work.

In fact, psychological debriefing has been found to be not the best clinical practice, and the evidence suggests that, "psychological debriefing is ineffective and has adverse long-term effects. It is not an appropriate treatment for trauma victims."

While workplaces may call upon counsellors to offer immediate assistance after traumatic events, more profound benefits can be found by offering employees help when they truly need it, often weeks or months later.

Casey Doyle, Critical Incident Manager at Sonder says the lack of support provided by employers after a critical incident can be fuelled by outdated assumptions of when and how employees might be affected or need supporting.



"It's clear from the incidents we manage that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to post-incident support. It's not uncommon for us to see affected employees reach out and engage in Sonder's support via chat at 2am, up to three or four weeks after an incident."

Casey Doyle - Critical Incident Manager, Sonder

Psychological First Aid (PFA)

PFA is the modern approach Sonder takes to critical incidents. This involves helping people feel safe, connected to others, calm and hopeful, and ensuring access to physical, emotional and social support. It aims to reduce initial distress, meet current needs, promote flexible coping and encourage adjustment.

"Most people recover naturally from trauma, without the need for formal mental health intervention. For individuals who might benefit from trauma support, this is best provided in a style, on a timeframe, and by a practitioner who best suits the needs of that individual," says Sonder's Dr Phillips.

Section 4.0

How Sonder provides support to frontline workers

Sonder provides support during and after incidents of customer aggression with 24/7 access to preventative tools and a nationwide on-the-ground response team.

This unique combination of proactive digital services and responsive human support reduces harm, drives early intervention and restores the health and safety of employees quickly.



During an incident

In-app support

With the Sonder app, members have access to support in their palm, 24/7. This provides peace of mind for shift or lone workers, who know they can reach out and speak to a real person in seconds.

Via instant chat or a phone call, Sonder's member support team can help them with de-escalation tactics, or coordinate with emergency services as needed.

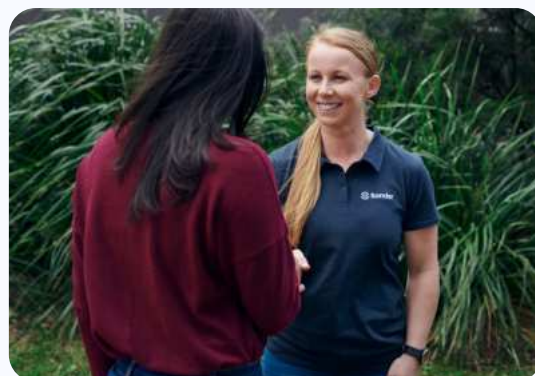


"We had an incident overnight with an aggressive customer. Sonder was used at about 1am this morning. After helping our employee call the Police, the support staff performed hourly check-ins. Our employee described his Sonder experience as being very good and they were very appreciative of the support."

Sonder Customer

On-the-ground responders

Sonder has a network of highly-trained responders who are ready to travel and provide in-person assistance at the workplace in times of critical need. Across the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Sonder has 148 responders, many of whom have a background in the emergency services, medical, or the military and all are trained in psychological first aid.



93%

of Sonder members were satisfied with Sonder's response to critical incidents, which included customer aggression. (Sonder Customer Satisfaction Score survey)

Sonder members on the support they received following critical incidents:

"The process was very easy to follow. Sonder was very responsive and able to attend one of our sites with short notice."

"The response was prompt and the gentleman they sent was nothing short of amazing"

"They were very supportive of the horrible situation we were experiencing in one of our stores. Very attentive to the needs of the situation and responded to all aspects of support requested."

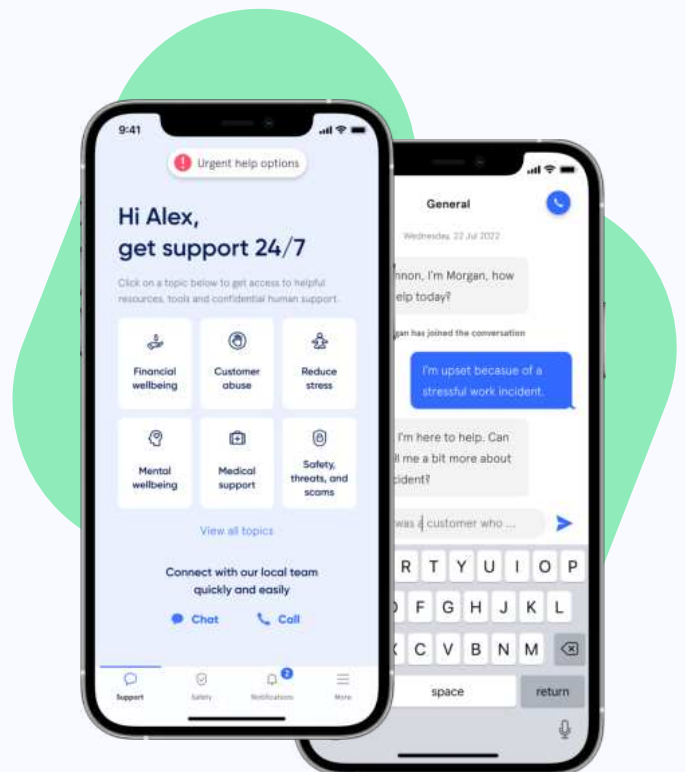
After an incident

In-app support

Whether it's the next day, week or month, Sonder members can use the app to access medical and mental health support. Sonder's highly-trained member support team will then triage the request, to determine the most helpful path forward and follow up with the member, to see how they're getting on.

On-the-ground responders

Sonder responders can visit a site following an incident of customer aggression to provide teams with face-to-face support. Responders will work with the local management team and with those affected to deliver personalised care, depending on the issues that member is dealing with, as well as providing them the knowledge of pathways to further support.

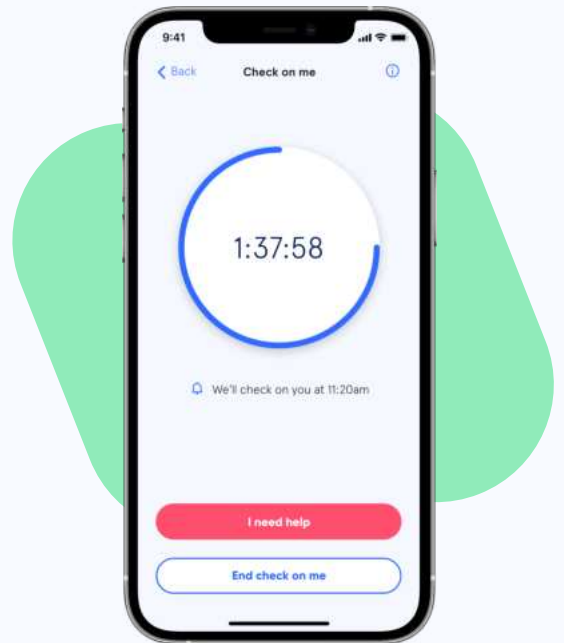


Early intervention

Check on me

Sonder's safety features, like the 'Check on me' tool, are being used by businesses to prevent the occurrence and severity of customer aggression, among other workplace risks.

'Check on me' is a discreet safety check-up. Members can set a time that suits (1am is the average 'Check on me' start time). When that time comes, the member can confirm they are fine, otherwise someone from Sonder's 24/7 member support team will reach out, and escalate the case as needed.



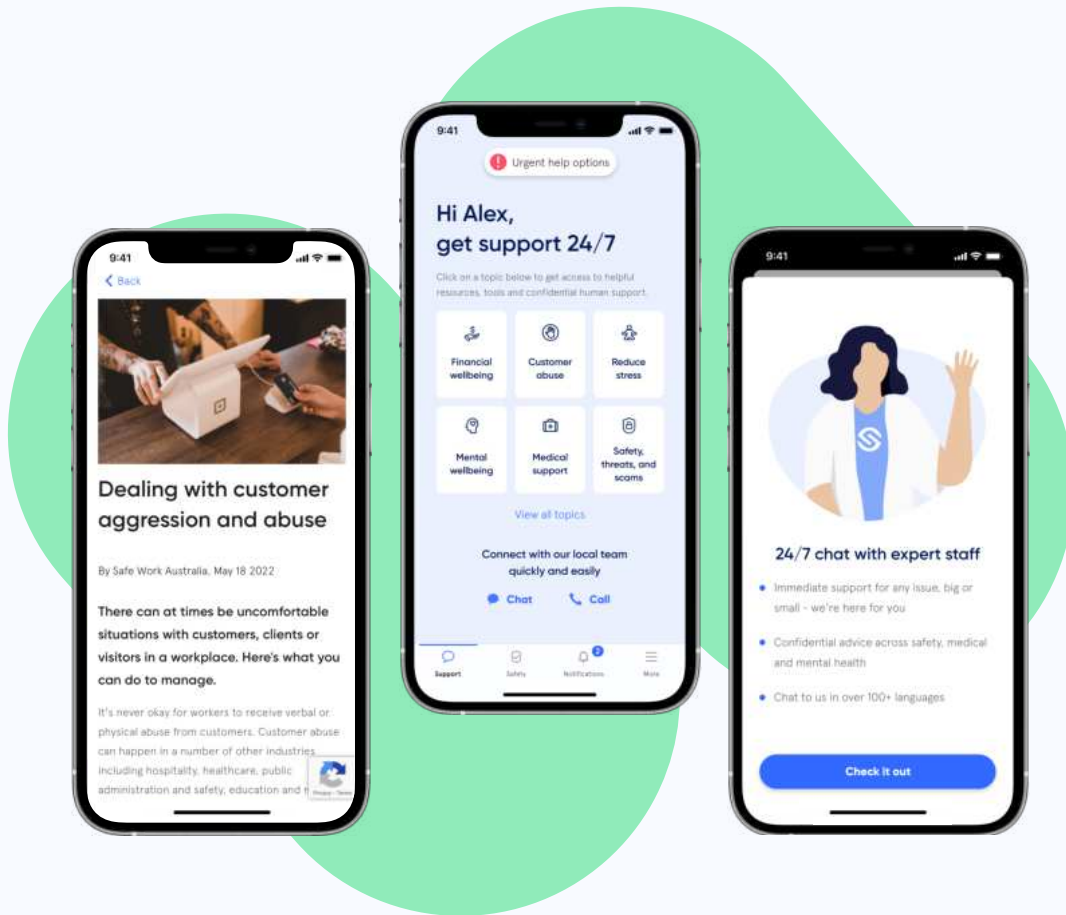
Sonder Case Study

TFE hotels

Sonder customer TFE Hotels has mandated that the 'Check on me' safety feature is used every 30 minutes when shift managers are working alone. Phil Rice, Director of Safety and Wellbeing, notes that this straightforward process has proven to be a simple yet effective way to reduce their risk against key safety and wellbeing hazards.

"The mandated use of Sonder's 'Check on me' is our preferred approach because if someone is unwell or unsafe in some way we want to minimise the length of time as much as practically possible. This approach works well for our people and our business."

At TFE, the use of 'Check on me' has brought peace of mind to both employees and the wider business, and has been used a staggering 65,865 times in the last 12 months. In tandem, TFE Hotels actively encourages the adoption of the 'Track my journey' app feature, especially for team members commuting to and from work.



Resources

Within the app, articles on de-escalation tactics and advice give people in customer-facing industries practical, actionable advice. This kind of information empowers teams to take the steps they need to protect themselves before an event occurs.

Data

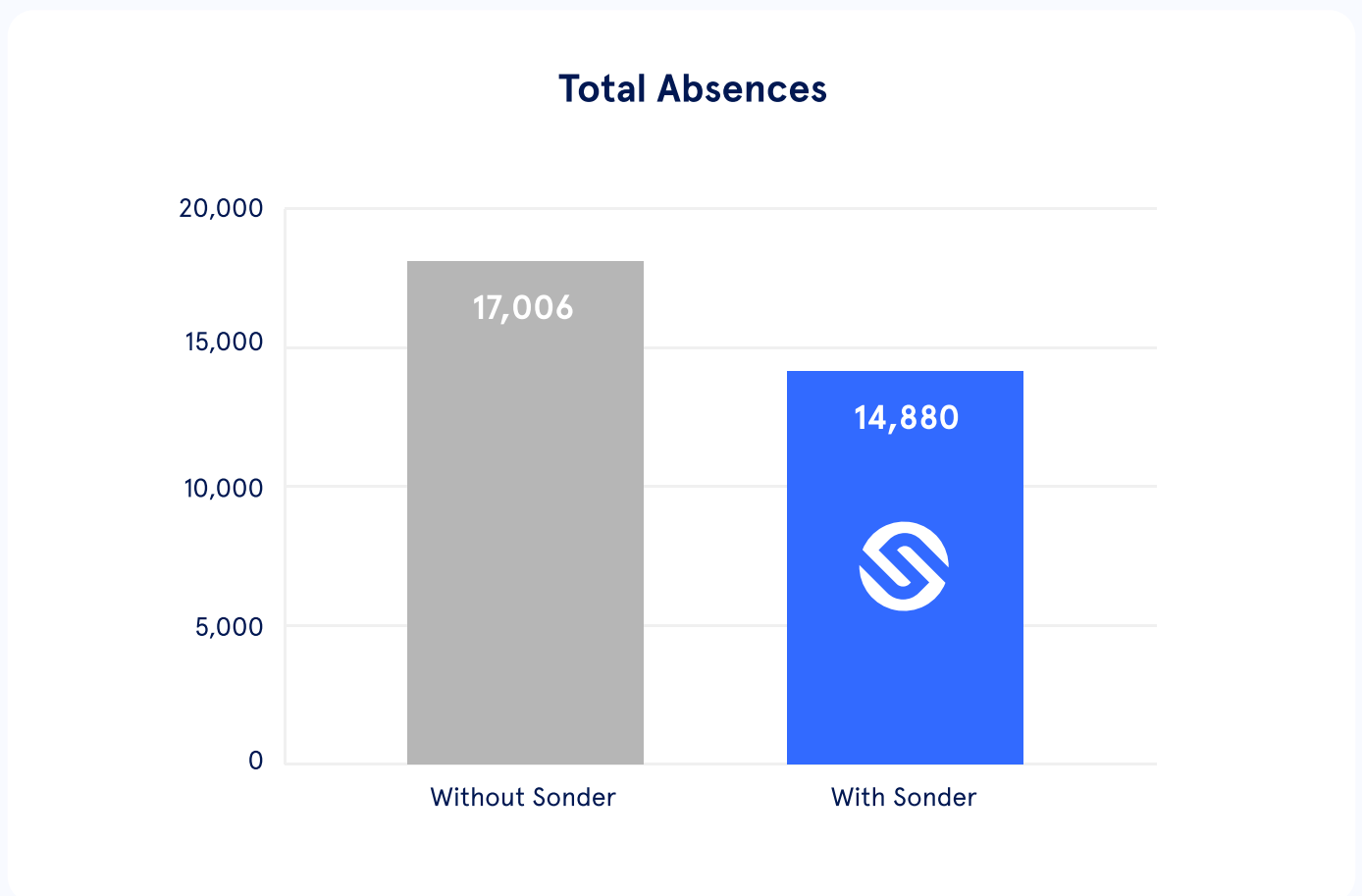
Businesses can use Sonder's real-time data to get ahead of their workforce health, safety and wellbeing challenges. Through a dashboard, businesses can track the health and safety status of their dispersed teams, helping them to identify trends and respond to the unique needs of their people. Armed with this information, leadership teams may bolster the support for locations, or shifts, that appear to be at a higher risk of aggressive customer incidents.

Reduced absenteeism and turnover

Through proactive digital services and responsive human support, Sonder customers have been able to reduce absenteeism and turnover within their organisation.

Absenteeism

Self-reported data from Sonder members indicates an average reduction in unplanned absences by up to 12.5% for those who engage with our platform.

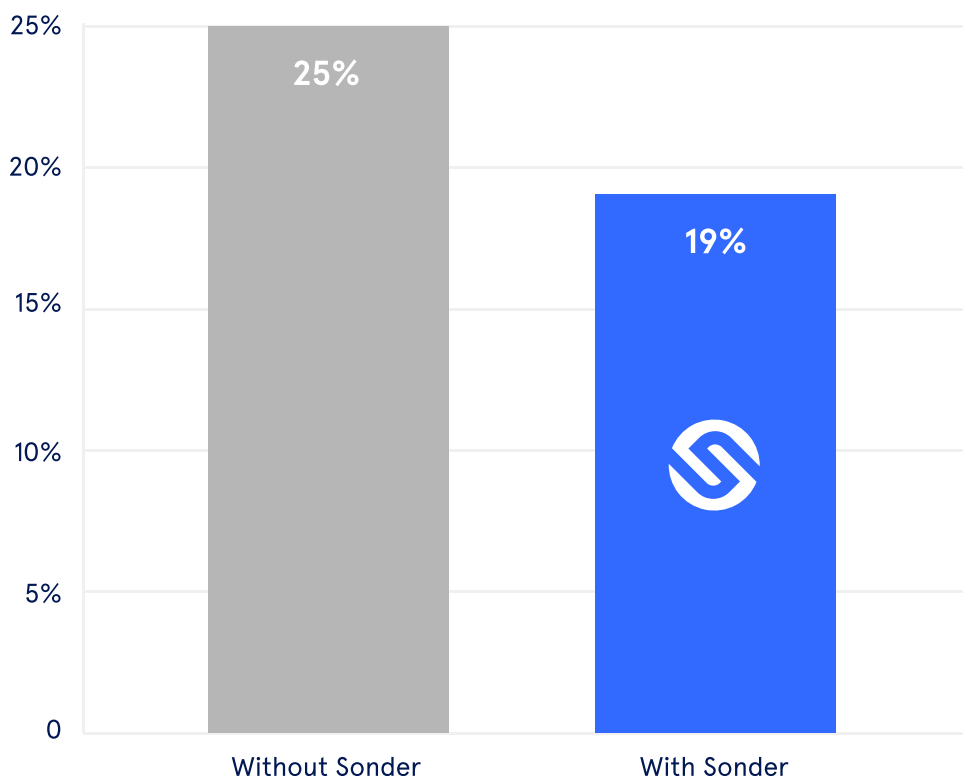


Turnover

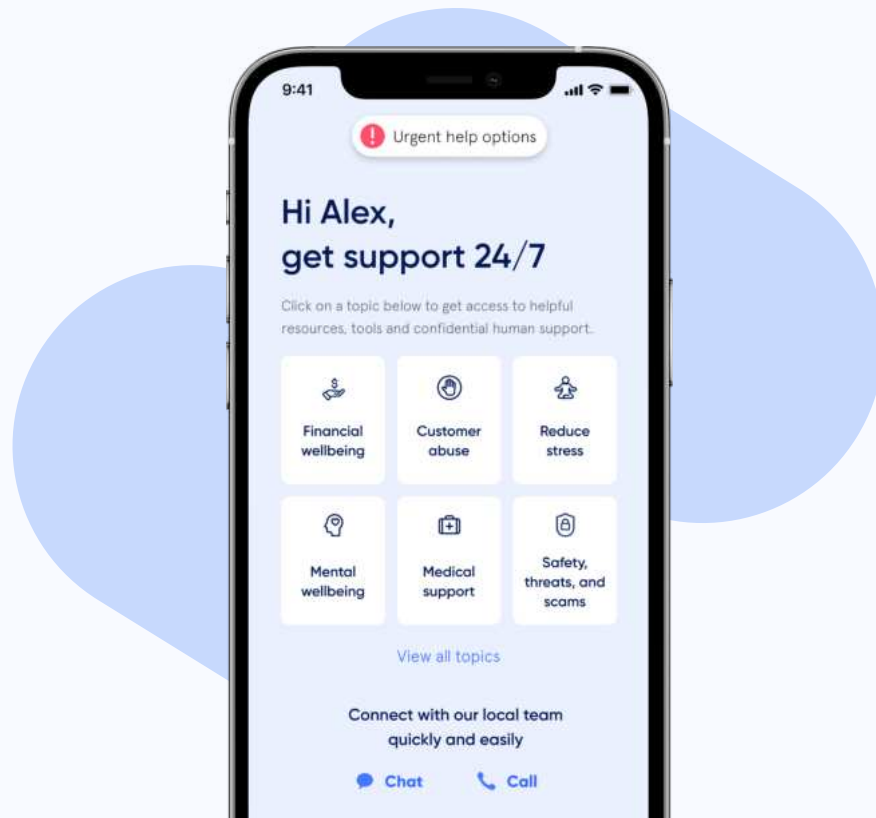
Employee turnover can be costly. With recruitment fees, time spent interviewing and training, not to mention the knowledge loss, it's easy to see why an employee choosing to leave can impact a business' bottom line.

Impact to retention: Using data matching between client HR labour turnover data and Sonder usage data, analysis of current Sonder clients has shown to improve retention by 6% - an ROI of around £1.80 - £2.10 for every pound spent on Sonder (see graphic below - analysis from a mid-sized client).

Labour Turnover Impact



£1 spent on Sonder = £1.80 - £2.10 saved



Book a demo to see Sonder's features in action

Discover how Sonder's proactive digital services and responsive human support reduces harm, drives early intervention and restores the health and safety of employees.

[Book a demo](#)

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