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OVERWHELMED: Threats to Employee Wellbeing Persist & Employer Support Remains Critical

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Beginning in July 2020, meQuilibrium has been tracing the impact of the pandemic on employee wellbeing through a series of bi-annual self-checks. Third in a series, this report details changes in overall wellbeing in a sample of 5,474 meQuilibrium members between December 2020 and July 2021. The sample includes respondents from a broad range of industries, featuring both individual contributors and managers. The average age among respondents was 51, and there were slightly more women (63%) than men.

RESULTS FROM THE PRESENT SELF-CHECK SUGGEST SIX CONCERNING TRENDS:

- 1 OVERALL THREATS TO WELLBEING CONTINUE TO TREND UPWARD.** Between December 2020 and July 2021 employees experienced sizable increases in burnout, work-life balance challenges, as well as job and health stress. Somatic symptoms of stress — specifically, reports of soreness in the neck and shoulders — were also up substantially. On top of the sizable burnout increases noted in each of the two previous rounds of the meQuilibrium self-check, the double digit increase seen in these data raise concern about burnout levels in the workforce.
- 2 PERCEIVED EMPLOYER SUPPORT HAS DECLINED.** Each of the two previous self-checks showed that the vast majority of employees felt well supported by their employer. The rate at which employees in the current self-check reported feeling strongly supported dropped by nearly 10 percent between the December 2020 and July 2021 iterations of the self-check. Given the powerful protective effect of perceptive employer support noted in previous self-checks, the decline noted here is a likely contributor to the increases noted in burnout and stress.

3 MANAGERS CONTINUE TO BE AT PARTICULARLY HIGH RISK OF BURNOUT. While managers remain highly engaged at work, the average manager's wellbeing is under greater threat than the average individual contributor's wellbeing. Managers reported 2.4X the increase in burnout compared to individual contributors, and were 4X as likely as non-managers to say there are "not enough hours in the day." The drop in perceptions of employer support was also substantially larger among managers than among individual contributors.

4 MEN'S SOMATIC STRESS LEVELS HAVE RISEN MARKEDLY BUT WOMEN CONTINUE TO BEAR A HIGHER BURDEN ACROSS ALL WELLBEING INDICATORS. Previous self-checks uncovered a number of important gender differences in wellbeing trends. In July 2021, while there was still evidence that the pandemic is impacting men and women differently, gender differences are on balance, much smaller. The notable exception to this pattern: the increase in somatic symptoms of stress was 6.5X greater among men than among women. While men are reporting more of this type of stress, they still bear a significantly lower stress burden than women.

5 YOUNGER EMPLOYEES REMAIN AT ELEVATED RISK. Younger employees are disproportionately burned out, stressed out and disengaged from work. Burnout increased among those under 30 years of age at nearly 3X the rate noted among older employees. Desires to change work-life balance were more than 5X greater among younger employees as compared to older employees. Job stress was up nearly 20% among younger employees but was flat among older employees.

6 WELLBEING TRENDS DIFFER DRAMATICALLY BY INDUSTRY. Consistent with the findings reported a year ago in the July 2020 self check, starkly different trends in key wellbeing indicators by industry persist. Employees in the hospitality industry reported large, double digit increases in somatic stress, burnout and intent to turnover but also reported the largest improvement in perceptions of strong employer support. Leaders across the finance industry have been particularly vocal in the return to work site movement. Within the finance industry, expressions of somatic stress were up 20%, burnout was up 30% and turnover intent was up 18%. The health care delivery industry showed a 32% increase in burnout that was second in magnitude only to the hard-hit hospitality industry. While less subject to the obvious trends that have negatively impacted wellbeing in the hospitality and health care sectors, employees in the technology sector actually showed large increases in threats to wellbeing. Technology industry employees reported the greatest increase in somatic stress of any industry and increases in burnout that were on par with those noted in the finance and health care industries.

TWO IMPORTANT POSITIVE FINDINGS ALSO EMERGED FROM THE JULY 2021 DATA:

1 **ENGAGEMENT IN SELF-CARE AND EMPLOYER SUPPORT CONTINUE TO REMAIN STRONGLY PROTECTIVE OF WELLBEING.** Employees who reported the strongest perceived employer support had more favorable wellbeing trends than those who reported feeling less strongly supported. Although burnout and reports of somatic symptoms of stress were up overall, those who felt strongly supported by their employer had half the rate of increase as those who felt less well supported. Compared to those who felt less well supported, employees who felt strongly supported by their employer were less likely to show turnover intent and were more likely to be engaged with their company, job and team. Employees who took an active part in self-care by engaging in digital resilience coaching also had better outcomes than those who did not. Where reports of high somatic stress were up 36% among the least engaged, there was no change among the most engaged members.

2 **IMPROVEMENTS IN WORK-LIFE BALANCE, SELF-CONFIDENCE AND SUPPORT SYSTEM ARE HIGHLY PROTECTIVE AGAINST BURNOUT.** A key driver analysis revealed that improvements in three resilience factors were particularly effective in reducing the risk of a member showing evidence of burnout in July 2021. Members who 1) learned practical strategies to help maintain a healthy boundary between work and home 2) boosted self-confidence, or 3) developed their personal support network were substantially less likely to develop symptoms of burnout over the first half of 2021.

IN SUM, THESE RESULTS CONFIRM THAT THREATS TO WELLBEING PERSIST, EVEN 18 MONTHS INTO THE PANDEMIC. However, they also reveal bright spots. Employee perceptions of employer support remain strongly protective of wellbeing. Active engagement in self-care through resilience building powerfully moderates the negative effects of the pandemic on burnout and stress. Though pressure on employers to maximize productivity and profitability is no doubt on the rise as we close in on two years of pandemic life, these findings show tremendous positive returns to the provision of practical and emotional support offered to employees.

BACKGROUND

BEGINNING IN JULY 2020, MEQUILIBRIUM HAS BEEN TRACING THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON EMPLOYEE WELLBEING THROUGH A SERIES OF BI-ANNUAL “SELF-CHECKS.” FOLLOWING THE PREVIOUS WAVE OF DATA COLLECTION IN DECEMBER 2020, THE DATA CAPTURED IN JULY 2021 DETAILS WELLBEING CHANGES OVER THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF 2021, ABOUT 16 MONTHS INTO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

The current report includes responses from 5,474 members who had registered before December 31, 2020. The sample is broadly representative of our member population and includes respondents from a broad range of industries. The finance/insurance, health products and devices and technology services were the most heavily represented industries followed by significant groups drawn from the health care, communications, manufacturing and energy sectors. Approximately 8 in 10 (82%) respondents were individual contributors with the balance (18%) representing employees with some management responsibility. The average age among respondents was 51, and there were slightly more women (63%) than men.

FINDINGS

Overall Threats to Wellbeing Continue to Trend Upward

Well over a year into the pandemic, threats to employee wellbeing continue to increase. Between December 2020 and July 2021 there were sizable increases [Figure 1] in burnout (up 21%), somatic symptoms of stress (up 17%) and more modest increases in job stress (up 4%) and work life balance challenges (up 9%).

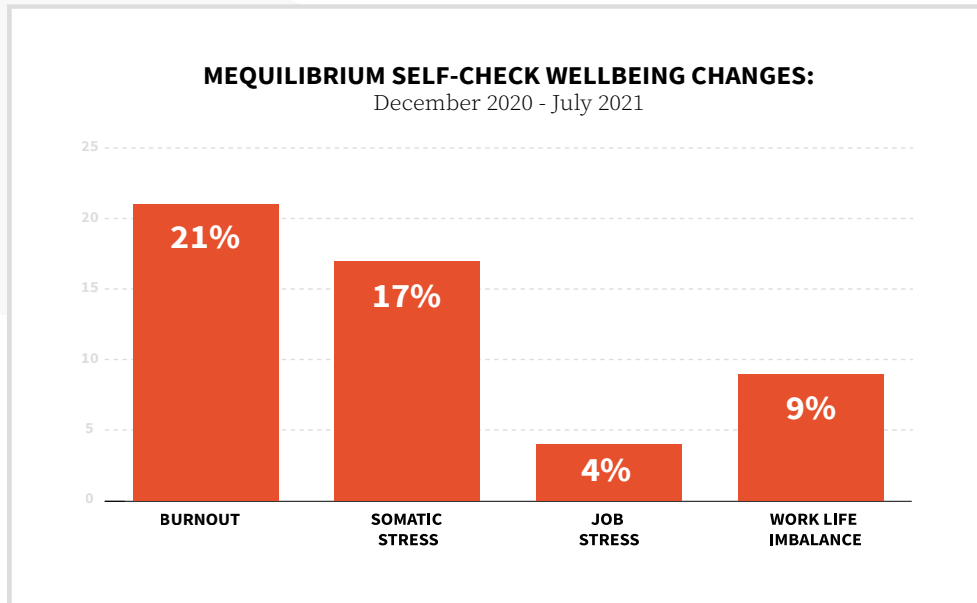


FIGURE 1

The cumulative effect of the pandemic on wellbeing continues to show strongly. While burnout [Figure 2] showed a minor increase in the first wave of the self-checks, the last two waves have uncovered very large, double digit increases in burnout as the pandemic wears on.

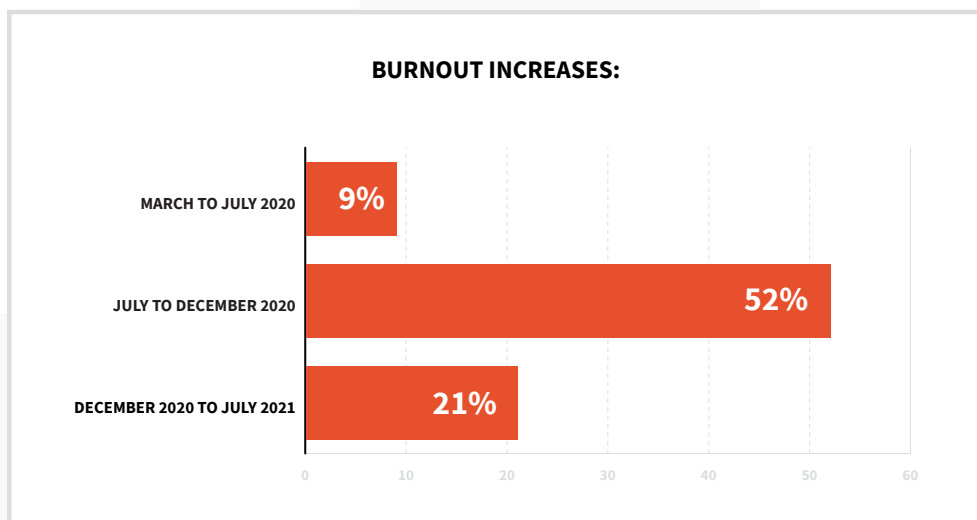


FIGURE 2

Perceived Employer Support has Declined

The initial self-check showed that the vast majority of employees feel like their employer is doing a good job supporting employees in and around the pandemic. The degree of perceived support was shown to have a powerful protective impact on wellbeing, with strongly supported employees showing essentially flat trends in job stress, disordered sleep and burnout, and less-well supported employees showing 3X to 30X larger increases in all three areas.

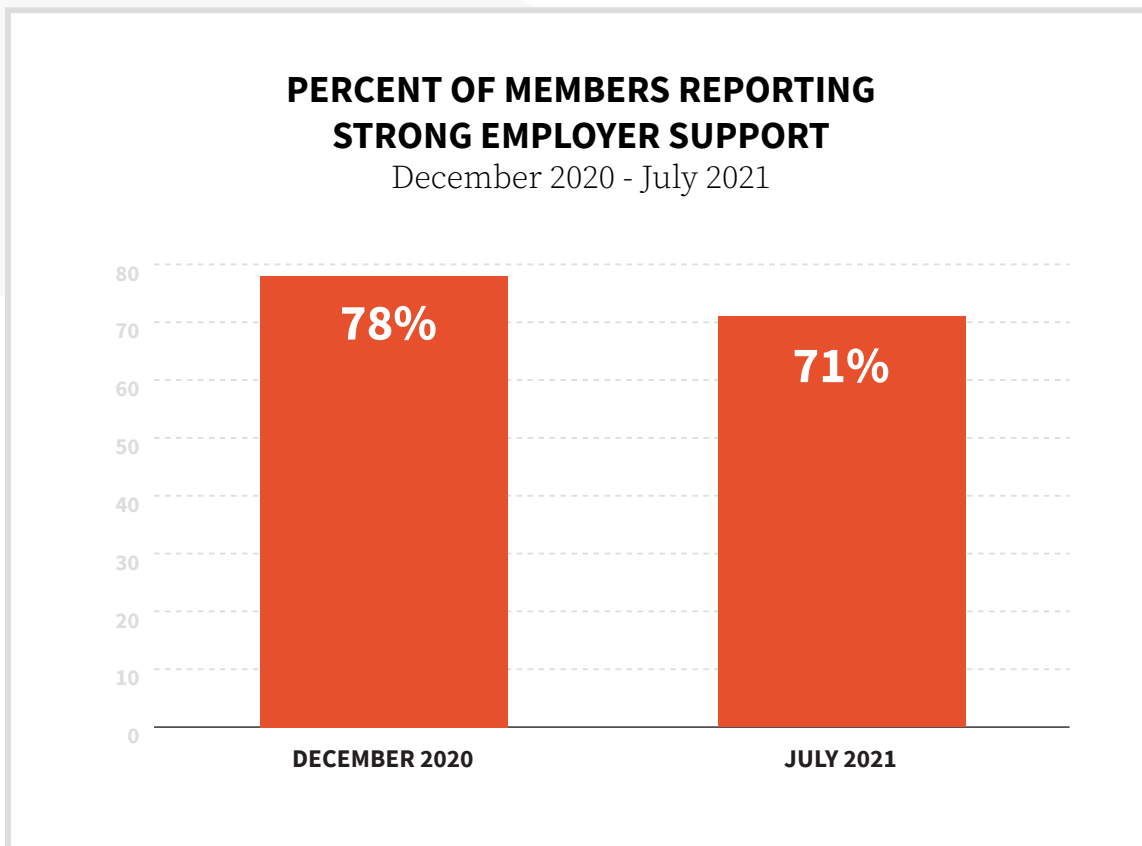


FIGURE 3

Results from July 2021 showed a significant downturn in the extent to which repeat self-check completers reported feeling well-supported, slipping from 78% in December 2020 to 71% in July 2021. While the C-suite had a primary focus on workforce safety and wellbeing early on in the pandemic, recent research by the [CONFERENCE BOARD](#) suggests that in 2021 CEOs are likely to be shifting to prioritize “accelerating digital transformation, modifying business models, and improving innovation, all while controlling costs and improving cash flow.” The drop in employee perceptions of support may in part reflect companies’ ongoing shift to focus on remaining competitive. Given the powerful protective effect of perceptive employer support noted in previous self-checks, the decline noted here is also a likely contributor to the increases noted here in burnout and stress.

Managers Continue to be at Very High Risk

According to Suzanne McAndrew, Willis Towers Watson’s global talent business leader, 2021 is the “year of the manager.” The success of the ongoing transformation of work rests on the ability of managers to create and maintain authentic and empathetic relationships with employees. Findings from the latest wave of the self-check summarized in Table 1 suggest that while managers remain highly engaged at work, the average manager’s wellbeing is under greater threat than that of the average individual contributor.

COMPARED TO INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS, MANAGERS...

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES NOTED AMONG MANAGERS, JULY 2021 MEQUILIBRIUM SELF CHECK

<p>THE GOOD</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are 18% more likely to feel connected to the company’s vision and mission • Are 16% more likely to feel connected to their job • Are 23% more likely to feel connected to their team
<p>THE NOT-SO GOOD</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have seen 2.4X the increase in burnout symptoms (54% vs 22%) between December 2020 and July 2021 • Are 4X as likely to say there are “not enough hours in the day” • 25% more likely to report getting angry more often than they used to

TABLE 1

While this wave of the self-check uncovered a broad-based drop in employee perceptions of strong employer support, the drop was precipitously larger (+20%) among managers than among individual contributors. These findings are unsurprising given all that is being asked of managers. As noted in the December 2020 self-check, managers were significantly more likely than individual contributors (+36%) to have taken on new duties at work due to the pandemic. Moreover, as indicated by the pronouncement of 2021 being the Year of the Manager, much is being asked of managers in the ongoing transformation of work. Taken together with the finding that manager burnout is up significantly, the finding that perceived employer support is down among managers strongly underscores the importance of self-care for managers. In order to provide empathetic leadership to their teams, managers must put the proverbial oxygen mask on themselves first in order to protect both the viability of their business as well as the wellbeing of the workforce.



Men’s Somatic Stress Levels Have Risen Markedly, but Women Continue to Bear a Higher Burden Across all Wellbeing Indicators

Previous self-checks uncovered a number of important gender differences in wellbeing trends, including that women were less likely to be setting aside time for self-care and were more likely to have taken on additional caregiving responsibilities due to the pandemic. The net impact on wellbeing was significant, even early on in the pandemic. In July 2020, just a few months after social distancing was put in place, women’s work stress had risen 19% compared to just a 2% increase among men.

In July 2021, while there is still evidence that the pandemic is impacting men and women differently, gender differences in trends between are, on balance, much smaller.

- **BURNOUT** is up **24% AMONG WOMEN** compared to **25% AMONG MEN**
- **PERCEIVED JOB AND HEALTH STRESS** is essentially unchanged among both men and women.
- **BELIEF THAT THERE AREN’T ENOUGH HOURS IN THE DAY** is up 13% among both men and women.

The notable exception to this pattern is somatic symptoms of stress which are up **6.5X TIMES GREATER AMONG MEN AS AMONG WOMEN** (Figure 4). While men clearly are reporting more stress-related aches and pains, they bear a significantly lower burden than women.

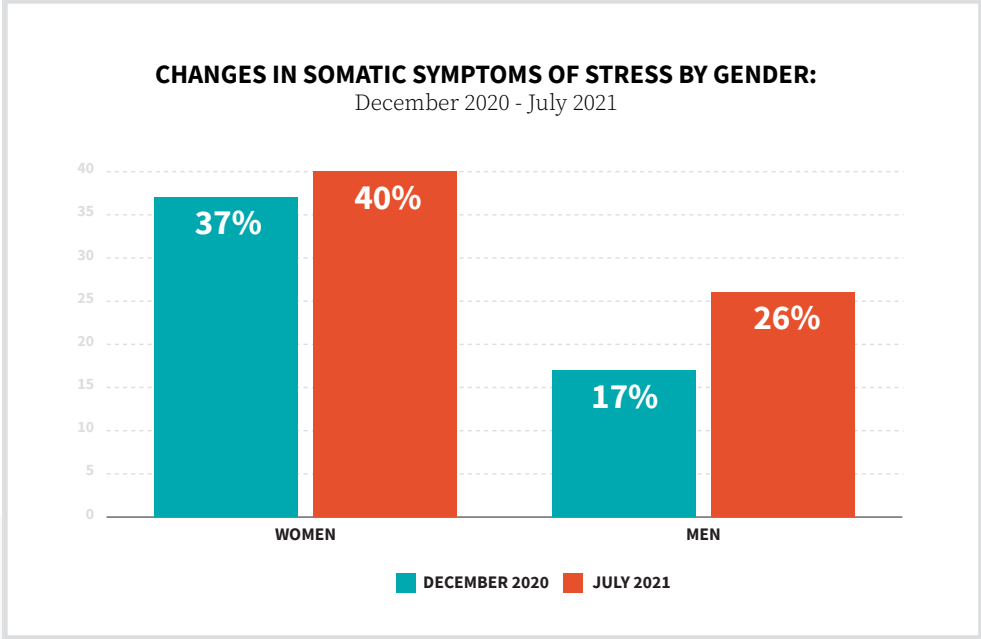


FIGURE 4

Younger Employees Remain at Elevated Risk

As in previous self-checks, these data reveal a continued disparity in wellbeing between younger (under 30) and older (age 30+) employees. Figure 5 summarizes the dramatic differences in trends between younger and older employees between December 2020 and July 2021. Burnout increased among those under 30 years of age at nearly 3X the rate noted among older employees. Desires to change the balance of work and life were up more than 5X greater among younger employees as compared to older employees. Job stress was up nearly 20% among younger employees but was flat among older employees.

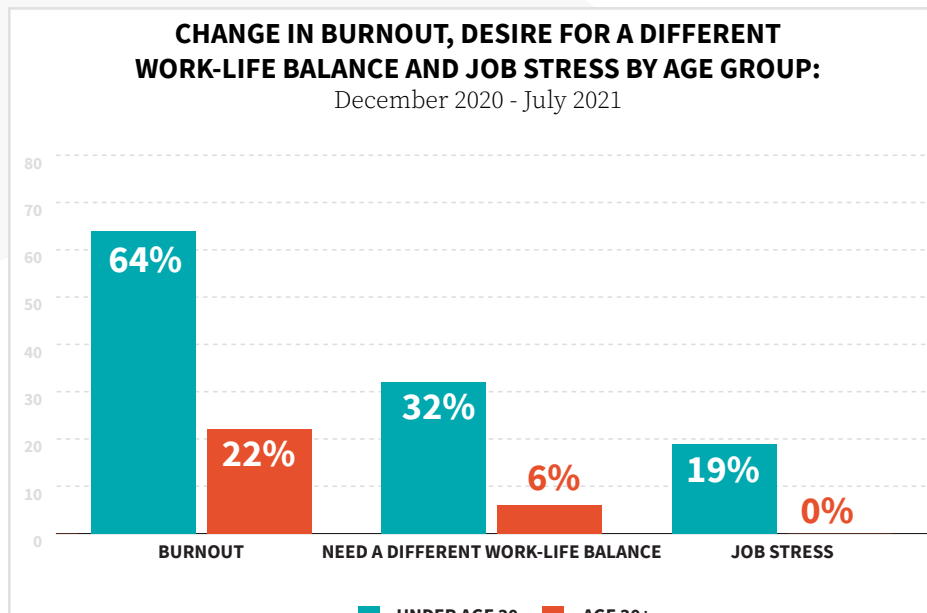


FIGURE 5

THE DIFFERENCES IN WELLBEING TRENDS ALSO EXTEND TO THE ENGAGEMENT METRICS INCLUDED ON THIS WAVE OF THE SELF-CHECK. COMPARED TO OLDER EMPLOYEES, THOSE UNDER 30 YEARS OF AGE WERE:

- **23%** less likely to feel highly connected to their company's mission and vision
- **26%** less likely to feel highly connected to their job
- **17%** less likely to feel highly connected to their team
- **73%** more likely to say they are thinking about quitting their job

Any evidence of a brewing Great Resignation in these data suggests that it is most likely to occur among the youngest employees. This group is disproportionately burned out, stressed out and disengaged from work. A full or hybrid return to worksite accompanied by increased access to social interaction with peers as well as improved access to mentoring from senior staff has the potential to reduce early-career stresses that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. However, should variants of the COVID-19 virus threaten to delay or wholly disrupt employees' return to site, employers may be able to reduce turnover through special support to their youngest employees.

Wellbeing Trends Differ Dramatically by Industry

Consistent with the findings reported a year ago in the July 2020 self check, we again see starkly different trends in key wellbeing indicators by industry. Consistent with the **PROFOUND BUSINESS IMPACTS** of the pandemic on the hospitality industry it comes as no surprise that this industry shows the greatest decrease in wellbeing (Table 2) across the seven industries represented in this study.

Employees in this industry reported large, double digit increases in somatic stress, burnout and intent to turnover. These trends seen in these indicators are likely tied to the highly uncertain timetable to full recovery from the pandemic combined with high exposure to risk from interaction with the public. In addition to showing the greatest increases in threats to wellbeing, hospitality industry employees show the largest improvement (12%) in perceptions of strong employer support.



Along with hospitality industry employees, employees in the finance industry have experienced a challenging first half of 2021. The finance industry, led by large commercial and investment banks, has been a leader in the return to site movement, “**NUDGING AND PRODDING AND SOMETIMES, GENTLY DEMANDING**” that employees get back into the office. The push is due in part to a concern about the mental health impacts of isolation at home and in part due to the industry’s strong mentoring tradition and, as **MORGAN STANLEY CEO JAMES GORMAN** puts it, traditions which value “watching and experiencing the professional skills of those who came before us.” Perhaps exacerbated by these trends, within the finance industry, expressions of somatic stress were up 20%, burnout was up 30% and turnover intent was up 18%.

Respondents in the health care industry showed a 32% increase in burnout that was second in magnitude only to the hard-hit hospitality industry. Courtesy of the most recent COVID-19 variant, **HOSPITALS ARE OVERWHELMED BY YET ANOTHER WAVE** of patients suffering life-threatening complications from COVID-19 infections, and pushing hospitalizations to near pre-vaccine records set earlier in the pandemic. Coming at a time when many health care facilities are struggling to fill **OPEN NURSING AND ALLIED HEALTH POSITIONS**, the surge in hospitalizations provides yet another wave of threat to the wellbeing of our health care workforce.

AVERAGE WELLBEING CHANGE BY INDUSTRY: December 2020 to July 2021

	COMMUNICATION	FINANCE	HEALTH PRODUCTS AND DEVICES	HEALTH CARE	HOSPITALITY	MANUFACTURING	TECHNOLOGY
SOMATIC STRESS	+15%	+20%	+7%	+15%	+24%	+3%	+43%
BURNOUT	+19%	+30%	+6%	+32%	+48%	+3%	+29%
FEELS STRONGLY SUPPORTED BY EMPLOYER	+4%	-17%	-5%	-8%	+12%	-9%	-5%
TURNOVER INTENT	+14%	+18%	+14%	+19%	+26%	+16%	+14%

TABLE 2 NOTE: HEAT MAP IS SHADED SUCH THAT MORE CHALLENGING CONDITIONS OR MORE NEGATIVE OUTCOMES ARE DARKER.

The data shows that the technology industry has also been hit hard. While less subject to the obvious trends that have negatively impacted wellbeing in the hospitality and health care sectors, employees in the technology sector actually showed large increases in threats to wellbeing. Technology industry employees reported the greatest increase in somatic stress of any industry and increases in burnout that were on par with those noted in the finance and health care industries. While adjustment to remote work in the technology industry might have been easier than in other industries, the high demand for technology services and products that accompanied the pandemic put enormous strain on these companies and their employees.

Engagement in self-care through digital resilience coaching and employer support remain strongly protective of wellbeing

As was found in the July 2020 self-check report, these data show a positive, protective impact of perceived employer support on wellbeing. While the number of employees who reported feeling strongly supported slid downward between December 2020 and July 2021, employees who reported the strongest perceived employer support had more favorable wellbeing trends than those who reported feeling less strongly supported.

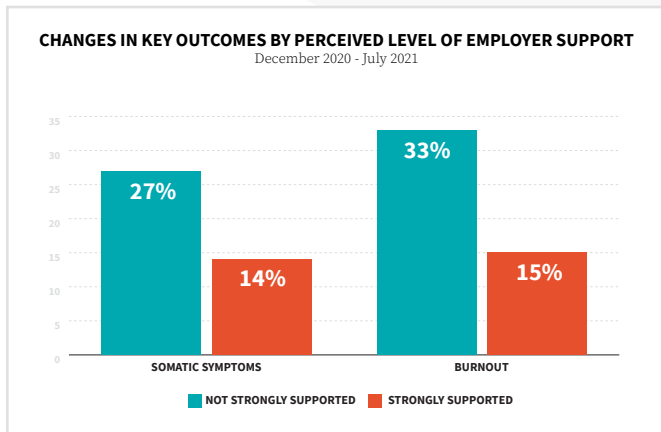


FIGURE 6

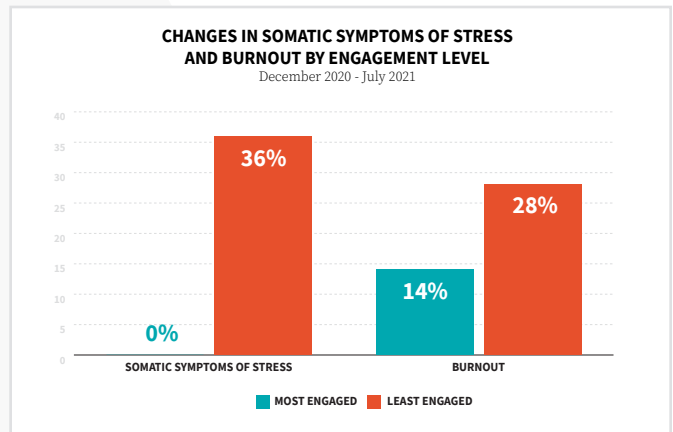


FIGURE 7

Although burnout and reports of somatic symptoms of stress were up in both groups, those who felt strongly supported by their employer had half the rate of increase as those who felt less well supported. The benefits of perceived support also extended beyond burnout and stress. Compared to those who felt less well supported, employees who felt strongly supported by their employer were:

- **52%** less likely to be considering quitting their job
- **27%** less worried about balancing work and family
- **91%** more engaged with the company’s mission and vision
- **66%** more connected to their job, and
- **44%** more connected to their team

EMPLOYEES WHO FEEL STRONGLY SUPPORTED BY THEIR EMPLOYER ARE

91%

MORE ENGAGED WITH THEIR COMPANY’S MISSION AND VISION

Employees who took an active part in self-care by participating in digital resilience coaching continued to have better outcomes than those who did not. The self-check respondents were divided into four equally-sized groups based on the amount of time they had spent engaged with the meQuilibrium digital solution. Contrasting the least invested to the most invested populations again reveals a startling difference in outcomes. Where reports of high somatic stress were up 36% among the least engaged, there was no change among the most engaged members. While burnout was up nearly 30% among the least well engaged, the increase was half as large among the most engaged.

Improvements in Work-Life Balance, Self-Confidence and Support System are Highly Protective Against Burnout

These findings show that time invested in resilience building has strong positive returns, but do not shed any light on the specific aspects of changes in resilience that are most protective of members' wellbeing. In order to identify specific changes that were protective against burnout, an additional key driver analysis was conducted among the members who participated in the self-check. Using multivariate statistical analysis, changes in each of the 18 meQuilibrium Resilience Factors were examined in order to identify those that were most protective against developing burnout among individuals who participated in the July 2021 self-check.

THE KEY DRIVER ANALYSIS REVEALED THAT IMPROVEMENTS IN THREE FACTORS WERE PARTICULARLY EFFECTIVE IN REDUCING THE RISK OF A MEMBER SHOWING NEW EVIDENCE OF BURNOUT IN JULY 2021: WORK LIFE BALANCE, SELF-CONFIDENCE AND SUPPORT SYSTEM.

Among the many challenges that have been presented by the pandemic is the blurring of the line between work and home as the majority of employees have faced some sort of altered work arrangement, whether it be hybrid or fully work from home. Of the three factors noted here to have protective effects, improvements in Work Life Balance showed the largest reduction in burnout risk. Members who learned practical strategies to help maintain a healthy boundary between work and home were substantially less likely to develop symptoms of burnout over the first half of 2021. Improvements in meQuilibrium's Self Confidence factor were also noted to be helpful in reducing the risk of decreased wellbeing. Low self-esteem has been identified by numerous previous studies as a risk factor for burnout. Boosting self-confidence, by learning to recognize and redirect self-defeating thought patterns, can be helpful in improving our ability to self-advocate and to make time for activities which help us relax and recover. Finally, members who saw increases in Support System scores were also less likely to see their burnout symptoms increase over the first half of 2021. These findings echo the findings of numerous scientific studies which detail the positive role that social support plays in moderating the effects of stress on wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

THREATS TO EMPLOYEE WELLBEING PERSIST, EVEN 18 MONTHS INTO THE PANDEMIC. However, these data also reveal noteworthy bright spots. Employee perceptions of employer support remain strongly protective of wellbeing. Active engagement in self-care through resilience-building activities powerfully moderates the negative effects of the pandemic on burnout and stress. Despite rising market pressure to maximize productivity and profitability, these findings show continued strong, positive returns to the provision of practical and emotional support to employees.

METHODOLOGY

meQuilibrium offers a digital resilience coaching solution that enhances wellbeing and is available to more than 2.5 million employees around the globe. To better understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on health and wellbeing in our member population, meQuilibrium invited a sample of members to participate in a COVID-19-related wellbeing “self-check” between July 23 and August 13, 2021. The self-check consisted of a set of questions focused on wellbeing and spanned topics including burnout, motivation, stress and work engagement. Survey items were drawn from meQuilibrium’s 92-question, clinically-validated resilience assessment and were supplemented by a set of additional questions asking about turnover intent, perceptions of employer support and levels of work engagement. A total of 5,474 members, a sample broadly representative of the meQuilibrium member population, provided complete responses to both the pre and post phases of data collection. Changes in stress, burnout, and other outcomes were examined by comparing responses to questions as of December 31, 2020 to responses to the self-check which was administered in summer 2021.

Data for this study were collected in several stages. On July 23, meQuilibrium sent out a Mental Wellbeing Self-Check to a large portion of its enrolled population. This Self-Check consisted of 9 of the same questions that are asked upon enrollment in meQuilibrium. The 92-question resilience assessment that users take upon enrolling is how meQuilibrium creates a member’s baseline score and provides a resilience-building program tailored to each user’s individual needs. This baseline score is made up of 18 key factors of resilience which are in turn made up of responses to the questions in the assessment. A user is given the opportunity to reanswer these questions either after completing a skill or upon reaching ninety days in the product.

To determine a proper baseline for this study, participants had their most recent responses to the 9 questions reconstructed as of December 31, 2020. Any user without all 9 questions answered by then was excluded from the study. The responses to all 9 questions at both time periods, on December 31, 2020 and upon taking the Self-Check, in addition to 19 questions related to work engagement were the basis for this study.

Respondents were provided a minor incentive to take the Self-Check: a donation of \$1 on their behalf to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Additional data as they relate to usage of meQuilibrium for each of these users were also included in this study. All data collected are anonymized, aggregated, fully privacy protected, and HIPAA compliant.