

# WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

## Because Psychologically Healthy Workplaces Contribute to a Psychologically Healthy Population

September 28, 2023

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An average full-time worker spends about 40 hours a week working. Assuming retirement at 67 years old, an average person will spend approximately 90,000 hours, or 10 years, of their life working. Given this, and the extent to which our work can shape our self-identities, it is not a stretch to say that psychologically healthy workplaces are critical for population mental health. That is, psychologically healthy workplaces meaningfully contribute to a mentally healthy population.

Before continuing, let's define what we mean by "mental health." The World Health Organization defines mental health as "a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community." To approach mental health as merely the absence of mental illness does not capture the complexity of our mental well-being. It is better conceptualized as a continuum that ranges from severe mental illness to psychological flourishing.



### Psychological well-being at work is on the minds of policymakers

The US Surgeon General's [2022 Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-being](#), recognizes that psychologically healthy workplaces meaningfully contribute to a psychologically healthy population. Further, it recognizes that psychological and physical health are inextricably intertwined. The Framework urges employers to make workplaces engines of psychological and emotional wellbeing.

The Surgeon General's Office conferred with social scientists, including staff and members of the American Psychological Association (APA), in developing the Framework. There are many factors identified in psychological science that contribute to a psychologically healthy workplace, and the Framework categorizes them into "Five Essentials": (1) protection from harm, (2) connection and community, (3) work-life harmony, (4) mattering at work, and (5) opportunity for growth.

In APA's [2023 Work in America Survey](#), we looked at the current views of the American workforce vis-a-vis the Five Essentials and assessed whether each Essential is associated with self-reported psychological well-being.

### Psychological well-being at work is on the minds of workers

First, psychological well-being is important to workers. Our survey revealed that:

- 92% of workers say it is important to work for an organization that values their emotional and psychological well-being,
- 92% say it is important to work for an organization that provides support for employee mental health,
- 95% say it is important to feel respected at work, and
- 95% say it is important to work for an organization that respects boundaries between work and nonwork time.

However, our survey also revealed that, for many, there are mismatches between *what workers want* from work and *what workers experience* at work.

#### Protection from Harm

Nearly 1-in-5 workers (19%) describe their workplace as "toxic." Further, workers who experience toxic workplaces are 3.5 times more likely to report having experienced harm to their mental health at work, and 2.7 times more likely to report that their work has negatively impacted their mental health. In fact, 55% of workers agreed that their employer thinks the workplace environment is mentally healthier than it actually is.

## Connection and Community

Although most workers report being generally satisfied with their workplace relationships, more than a quarter (26%) say they have experienced feelings of loneliness or isolation at work. Further, close to one-third (30%) say their workplace does not support them because of an aspect of their identity, such as race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability status, age, etc.

## Work-life Harmony

Strikingly, less than half (40%) of workers agree that their employers offer a culture where time off is respected. In addition, more than one-quarter (26%) report that their employer does not respect their personal boundaries. Workers who report not having the flexibility to keep their work and personal life in balance were more likely to report that their work environment had a negative impact on their mental health (67%) compared with those who did have that flexibility (23%).

## Mattering

Fortunately, 87% feel the work they do is meaningful. This is important because workers who report they do not have meaningful work are more likely to report feeling stressed or tense during the workday as compared to workers who report having meaningful work (71% vs. 45%).

## Opportunity for Growth

Almost three-quarters of respondents (74%) are at least somewhat satisfied with the opportunities for growth and development at work. Again, this is important because workers who lacked those opportunities more frequently report feeling tense and stressed during their workday as compared to workers who have opportunities (66% vs. 42%).

## Room for Improvement

Our data reveals good news and bad news. On one hand, 77% of workers reported being satisfied with the support for mental health and well-being they receive from their employers and 72% of workers agreed that their employer helps them develop and maintain a healthy lifestyle. On the other hand, exposure to toxic workplaces, lack of respect for time off, and serious daily stressors continue to put an unacceptably high number of workers at risk of psychological harm.

## Some Practical Steps

How we approach improvement matters. We submit that success stems from capitalizing on workers' strengths and moving workers forward on the mental health continuum.

We encourage employers to intentionally focus on developing [psychological capital](#) (PsyCap) in their organizations. PsyCap encompasses four healthy psychological states (hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism) that work in concert. Purposefully developing PsyCap can enhance worker performance and organizational performance.

We also encourage employers to develop psychological safety in the workplace. By fostering psychological safety, organizations encourage employees to take ownership of their work and to feel safe taking necessary risks, asking questions, soliciting feedback, and contributing ideas, all without fear of negative repercussions.

So, why social science? Because we spend upwards of 10 years of our lives at work. Because our places of work can influence population mental health. And because we have scientific evidence and [resources](#) to make our workplaces engines of psychological health and well-being.



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