

# COVID wellbeing learnings

**The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an increased research focus on workplace wellbeing, particularly among frontline health and other essential workers, operating in the eye of the storm. We seek to understand the main messages.**

**W**orld Health Organisation **2020 research** identifies stress, depression and loneliness as the main issues facing workers, and last year the **Auckland University of Technology** surveyed 1,000 New Zealanders during lockdown, revealing 11 per cent suffered burnout. This has positively led to many organisations rethinking their HR policies, focusing on both physical and mental health. So, what advice can be gleaned from research for HR practitioners when managing their workforce amidst, and beyond, the global pandemic?

## Culture and climate

First, **Hobfoll's conservation of resources theory** suggests that employees have a resource toolkit that can be stocked up and then used when needed. The benefit of this resource toolkit is that it boosts employees' resilience, while

employees with depleted or empty toolkits have reduced resilience, leading to stress and depression.

So how can HR practitioners help employees to restock their toolkit after the COVID-19 depletion? Research suggests this can be achieved by ensuring employees receive clear, unambiguous, consistent communication and messaging, that leadership and supervisory relationships should be imbued with authenticity, and training opportunities should be provided. Last, the culture and climate of the organisation needs to be supportive so both the professional and personal needs of employees are addressed.

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## Change of focus

Second, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted to both academics and practitioners the importance of wellbeing in workplace performance. For many organisations, this has meant an extension to the remit of their health and safety policies, which research suggests need to be


sufficiently broad to include aspects related to the job, the organisation's environment, and the nature of social relationships. This has turned attention away from a focus on physical harm and managing risk to creating both a physically and mentally safe workplace.

Coupled with this is the change to a **shared responsibility between employers and employees for reduced harm** under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015. This means HR practitioners need to focus on opening up the channels of communication to solicit ideas and feedback from their workforce about how best their psychological wellbeing might be supported.

## The bigger picture

Third, the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the need for organisational and HR leaders to continuously review how they **create a healthy workplace.**

This means HR practitioners need to think about what a flexible and relevant wellbeing strategy might look like in their organisation. Central to this strategy is a safe working environment that supports employees to flourish and thrive when faced with ongoing uncertainty. Here, research suggests policies that address job security are important. So too is



workplace flexibility and giving employees control over their day-to-day work environment.

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### Balancing the positives and negatives

Finally, the period we spent in lockdown opened the eyes of organisations and employees to the potential benefits of remote work. A **University of Otago study** suggested people were equally or more productive working from home and wanted to continue some form of remote working post-lockdown. But this should not be considered a panacea for productivity. Issues around Zoom fatigue, health and safety, monitoring, setting performance goals, individual control and trust all need to be considered when designing a remote and flexible work policy that will be mutually beneficial for employees and employers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has afforded HR practitioners the mandate to initiate and implement change. This gives us the potential to review HR strategies, policies and practices, potentially enabling HR practice to harness these opportunities to create a sustainable wellbeing agenda.



**Anna Earl** (PhD) teaches advanced human resource management. Her main research interests revolve around the relationship between government and multinational enterprises, and the practices of qualitative researchers. Her current research interests are in emerging economies, expatriates, and stakeholder relationships.



**Paula O'Kane** (PhD) is a senior lecturer in Human Resource Management at the University of Otago, Dunedin. Her recent research has explored social media in selection, remote working and performance management.

She is part of the Work Futures Otago group, exploring the Future of Work in Aotearoa New Zealand.



**Fiona Edgar** (PhD) is an associate professor in the Department of Management at the University of Otago, Dunedin. She teaches strategic human resource management (HRM) and is widely published in the HRM area. Her current research

interests include HRM and, in particular, how this impacts on employees in the workplace, as well as the relationship between HRM and organisational performance.