Vhi Health Insights

The corporate social network:
employee engagement and
well-being in a changing workplace

Vhi

Contents

Foreword

Vhi is committed to deepening our knowledge of the challenges to health and well-being and exploring innovative and effective responses to those challenges. In this, the fifth edition of *Vhi Health Insights*, we report on social engagement among corporate employees, highlight the implications for their health and well-being and propose strategies to improve the quality of interaction in the evolving workplace.

Our research schedule for this edition coincided with the unprecedented circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, with data being gathered both before the outbreak and during the most intense period of nationwide Covid-19 restrictions. This resulted in a rich accumulation of data with lessons for health and well-being in the evolving workplace in whatever shape it takes.

The research published here will inform the programmes we are developing to address challenges in relation to social engagement/interaction identified by our findings and our expert group: Francis Cleary, Founder, Step Out Ireland; Lyndon Garrett, Assistant Professor, Organizational Behaviour and Theory, Boston College; Dr Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Dept. of Psychology, Brigham Young University; Naoise Kavanagh, eMental Health Programme Manager, Jigsaw; Richard Layte, Professor of Sociology, TCD; Dr Marie Polley, Director, Marie Polley Consultancy Ltd & Co-Chair The Social Prescribing Network; Tomás Sercovich, CEO, Business in the Community Ireland; Dr Lisa Van Der Werff, Associate Professor, Organisational Psychology, DCU; Dr Mark Ward, The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA), TCD; and Dr Fred Zijlstra, Professor of Work & Organisational Psychology, Maastricht University.

I would like to express our gratitude to the group of employees across Ireland whose continuing participation in our surveys is an essential element of this research series and particularly, on this occasion, to those who took part in our corporate employee engagement forum and lockdown digital diary. I also want to extend our thanks to Behaviour & Attitudes for carrying out this valuable research to improve our understanding of the factors that affect the quality of social engagement among corporate employees.

John O'Dwyer
Chief Executive, Vhi Group

Executive Summary

The complexity of social engagement in the corporate workplace is underlined by our research findings which show a strong prevalence of friendships among colleagues accompanied by dissatisfaction with workplace interactions and consequent negative implications for corporate employee well-being.

In all, 70% of corporate employees said they had formed strong friendships at work. Moreover, employees place a high level of trust in their corporate colleagues with 65% reporting that they trust fellow employees a great deal. However, the levels of dissatisfaction across a range of interactions in the corporate workplace are also high, peaking in relation to wider work relationships, group messaging services and organised corporate social events.

It is critically important to understand this dichotomy and its causes, given the strong pre-existing evidence cited by the expert group in relation to the effects that interactions at work can have on the well-being of corporate employees.

The expert group that participated in our research identified some factors which encourage the development of counterproductive 'unwritten rules', adversely affecting social engagement and instilling employee dissatisfaction. Despite the positive relationships among close colleagues and the physical design of work spaces, communication blind spots still exist, i.e., corporate messaging that is misunderstood, unclear or lacking.

The findings show that the majority of social engagement in the workplace occurs organically by chance, at the water cooler, passing by desks or getting a coffee, underlining the importance of the location and design of the spaces where these interactions occur. The employee engagement expert group says it is critical to be aware that the design of some work spaces encourage employees to cross paths and interact, while others can create isolating 'silos'.
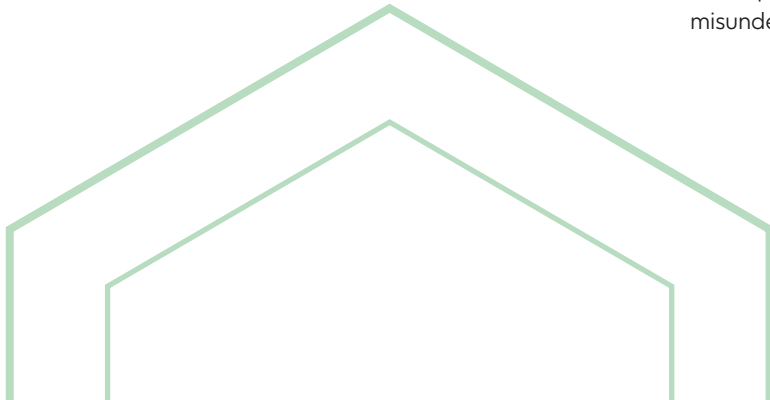
In addition, the communication blind spots within company culture have a strong negative influence on the quality of social engagement. Examples of unwritten rules that attract strong allegiance among corporate employees are:

- regardless of how productive your day has been, if you regularly leave the office before most of your co-workers, you are labelled as lazy or lacking drive (more than 50% of corporate employees agreed with this statement); and,

- you appear less committed if you use social facilities in your office during the working day (29% agreed with this).

To counter the effects of unwritten rules and develop greater clarity of communication in the workplace, the expert group notes there must be a fundamental realisation that the simple provision of a facility by an employer is not sufficient. It is important to demonstrate clearly that the company culture supports sociable behaviour and engagement and that this is communicated without ambiguity.

The Covid-19 pandemic occurred while this research was being undertaken making it possible to assess the impact of working from home on social interactions.

Overall, professional interactions improved during working from home during the research period. For 40% of corporate employees, communication with their boss or immediate supervisor got better during the lockdown (maximum Covid-19 restrictions nationwide in March-April 2020). According to the expert group, this was driven by greater clarity in professional engagement, as interactions became primarily goal-focused and less nuanced through the use of web conferencing and other digital tools.

However, the opportunity for social engagement declined during lockdown, with corporate employees reporting increased stress, as well as increases in dissatisfaction levels with mental health (up to 41% extremely dissatisfied) and social life (up to 62% extremely dissatisfied).

Key recommendations for the evolving workplace

The shape of the future work space is uncertain but it is likely that the dedicated workplace, while altered, will continue to play a significant role in the life of corporate employees. The expert group made key recommendations in relation to promoting social engagement that will enhance corporate employee well-being in this evolving workplace. They include:

1 **Encourage goal-demoted conversations**
These conversations can be encouraged by facilities such as coffee docks and relaxation spaces, designed in such a way as to invite entry and participation, and by social initiatives, such as sports and workplace societies.

2 **Nurture a sense of belonging and psychological safety**
In so far as possible, 'tailor' teamwork to the skills and interests of the team. Encourage company wide 'community rituals', such as daily greetings and in-group conversation topics. Set up leadership and employee empathy training, focusing on the provision of feedback, employee management and appreciation.

3 **Enhance clarity of communication**
The rationale for the planned actions must be clearly explained and corporate support for these initiatives must be clearly and unambiguously communicated.

4 **Encourage volunteering and CSR activities**
Corporate support for these initiatives needs to be explicitly demonstrated.

5 **Address the unwritten rules**
Address areas of work practice that have evolved as assumed 'expectations' with overt policy statements backed up by new rules with clear explanations.

1. A social dividend

The value of positive social engagement in the workplace

The quality of our interactions at work can profoundly affect the well-being of corporate employees.

The social brain

The primacy of the urge to be social is deeply embedded within us. Evolutionary psychologists contend that humans are 'designed' to be social and are naturally conditioned to seek out and create high quality moments of interaction with each other during their day-to-day lives, including during their working day. Through these interactions, we seek to satisfy our needs for a sense of belonging, a sense of identity and a sense of purpose.

What drives social interaction?

The extent to which casual and formal meetings and conversations can influence our well-being is better understood when we identify the inner motivations that drive them. The powerful yearning for connection with others is ascribed by the expert group to four primary drivers:

- a search for purpose which drives interactions that contribute towards a valuable goal;

- a need for release which drives interactions where we experience enjoyment and feel a sense of reward;

- a sense of obligation which drives interactions that adhere to social expectations and the fulfilment of responsibilities; and,

- a need for intimacy which drives interactions that provide a deeper level of connection and belonging.

These motivations are prevalent in all aspects of life including the corporate workplace where there are multiple opportunities for obligation-driven, purpose-driven or release-driven interactions.

Awareness of these motivations is particularly helpful in interpreting how the workplace, through its culture and physical design, shapes social interactions in positive or negative ways (see Chapter 3, page 13).

Implications for health and well-being

Major longitudinal studies including significant projects in Ireland – Growing Up in Ireland and The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) – have identified a strong link between the quality of social interactions and long-term health.

Where there is a deficit in social engagement, the consequences for mental and physical health can be profoundly negative. The expert group notes an extensive body of research points to the risk levels for premature mortality rising significantly with the experience of living alone (a 32% rise), social isolation (a 29% rise) and loneliness (a 26% rise). According to a member of our expert group, Dr Holt-Lunstad: "What happens is, when we experience these things on a more chronic basis, they can actually put wear and tear on the body."

Isolation can affect individuals in the most basic ways, undermining the ability to communicate and interact easily with others. Dr Holt-Lunstad points out: "Many social cues and information are not always obvious and the more isolated an individual is, the less likely they are to be adept at picking up on these social signals."

Such is the effect of engagement on well-being it is now well-established in the UK as a significant complementary healthcare option (see panel, A social prescription for mental health, page 28). It has also been introduced, in pilot form, as a treatment option across the Republic of Ireland.

The well-being implications of social interactions in the workplace

With the centrality of work in our lives, and the proportion of our time that we commit to it, social activity in the workplace constitutes a large proportion of our daily interactions. Clearly, therefore, social interactions in the workplace of high or low quality have the potential to significantly impact on corporate employee well-being, positively and negatively.

The workplace is, in the view of the expert group, a key arena in which employees ought to be able to experience high quality moments of interaction. Assistant Professor Lyndon Garrett, Boston College, a member of the expert group, defines the nature of high-quality social interactions: "These are moments of interaction when you come away feeling energised, have a sense of regard for the other person and a sense of mutuality or togetherness with the other person. When you experience those three things, that's what defines the high quality connection."

Conversely, low quality or negative interactions are characterised by: a challenge to, and depletion of, energy; a weakening of mutual regard; and an undermining of a sense of togetherness.
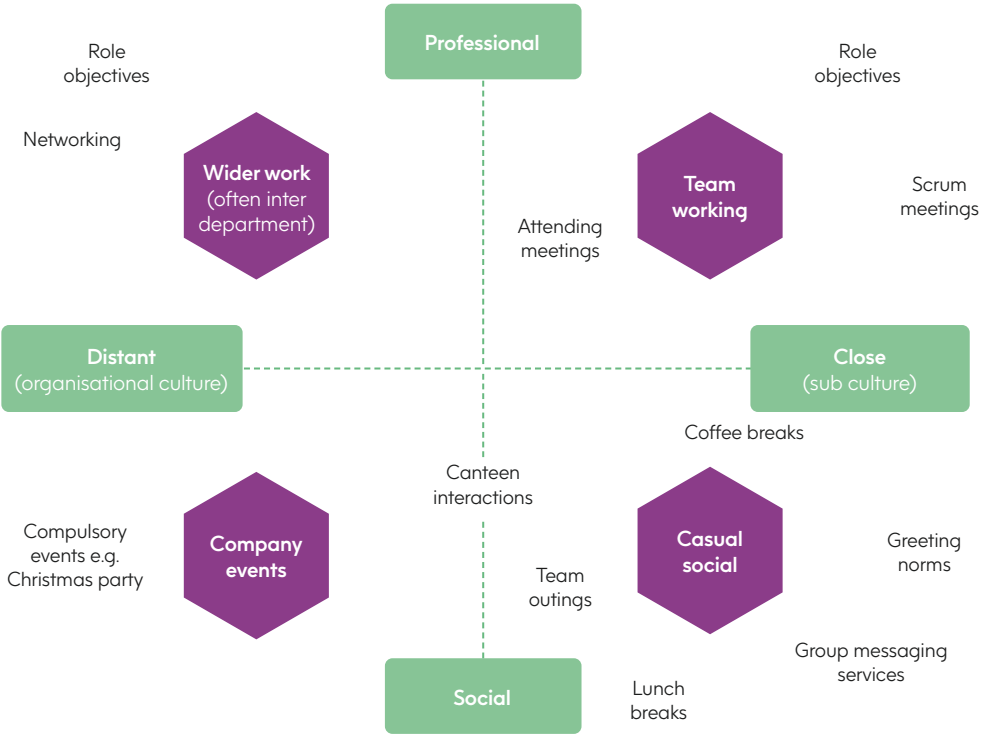
These negative interactions, according to the expert group, are particularly problematic, as their impact is magnified by our negative cognitive bias, the general human tendency to register negative cues and information more readily than positive ones. This is exacerbated when employees are experiencing additional negative social encounters or a lack of social interaction, such as loneliness. When experiencing loneliness, for example, they are unable to 'sense-test' cues and information with a colleague, creating opportunities for miscommunication and misunderstanding.

Expert group member Dr Lisa Van Der Werff believes that the propensity to focus on negative social engagement creates a vicious cycle for people in terms of their well-being. She explains: "Where we have relationships that are negative, we have huge amounts of negative emotion that come with that, and this has important implications for stress and well-being."

In summary, the evidence is clear that social engagement in the workplace can operate as an important determinant of corporate employee well-being. Over time, the quality of these interactions compounds to create positive or negative workplace relationships and positive or negative health and well-being impacts.

Mapping social interactions in the workplace

Types of workplace relationships

Role objectives

Networking

Professional

Role objectives

Wider work (often inter department)

Team working

Scrum meetings

Attending meetings

Distant (organisational culture)

Close (sub culture)

Coffee breaks

Canteen interactions

Compulsory events e.g. Christmas party

Company events

Casual social

Greeting norms

Team outings

Social

Lunch breaks

Group messaging services

Employees tend to have more interactions at the close (sub culture) level

To understand how the workplace affects social interaction, it is helpful to define the parameters within which interactions take place. Broadly speaking interactions in the workplace fall into two categories, professional and social. Professional interactions focus on work objectives, networking and attending meetings. Social interactions take place in casual settings such as during lunch breaks, at the water cooler or passing a colleague's desk. They tend to focus on non-work related topics and are described as goal-demoted, i.e., they tend to have no obvious sub-goals. It is conversation for the sake of conversation.

In addition to the professional/social axis, interactions are also mapped on a relationship axis ranging from close to distant. Social interactions can take place between corporate employees with professional relationships that range from close (such as with a colleague on a small team) to more distant (say between colleagues from different departments within a company).

The occasions and venues for interaction can range from formal occasions such as attendance at business meetings to more relaxed interactions, for instance, on a coffee break with close colleagues. In general, a corporate employee tends to have most interactions with close colleagues in their proximate space within the workplace.

The distinctions between these categories (professional and social) are not always clear-cut. Clear-cut work objectives can sometimes be discussed in informal settings and goal-demoted casual conversations can kick off a formal meeting. However, as our research in the following pages will demonstrate, the quality of interaction is usually defined by the clarity of its objective, be that professional or social. Where the focus of the interaction becomes blurred, the quality of social interaction, whether casual or professional, can be adversely affected.
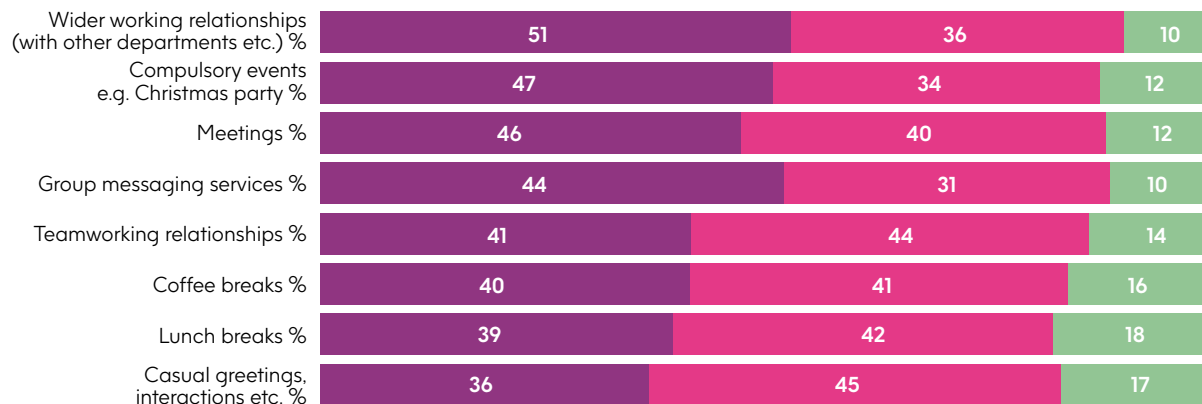
2. Meet and greet

Employee perceptions of the quality of interactions at work

The levels of dissatisfaction across a range of interactions in the corporate workplace are strikingly high, peaking in relation to wider work relationships, group messaging services, organised corporate social events and meetings.

Social corporate interactions (Pre Covid)

Base: Corporate employees n= 434

How satisfied are you with each of the following types of interactions in your company?

Category	Extremely dissatisfied 1-6	7-8	Extremely satisfied 9-10
Wider working relationships (with other departments etc.) %	51	36	10
Compulsory events e.g. Christmas party %	47	34	12
Meetings %	46	40	12
Group messaging services %	44	31	10
Teamworking relationships %	41	44	14
Coffee breaks %	40	41	16
Lunch breaks %	39	42	18
Casual greetings, interactions etc. %	36	45	17

The active levels of dissatisfaction across various forms of corporate interactions are strikingly high, peaking in relation to our wider working relationships with other departments etc.

⬢ Extremely dissatisfied 1-6   ⬢ 7-8   ⬢ Extremely satisfied 9-10

Given their implications for well-being, it is concerning to see the high levels of dissatisfaction with workplace interactions among corporate employees indicated by our research findings. In all, 51% were dissatisfied with their wider working relationships with other departments, 47% were dissatisfied with 'compulsory events' such as the Christmas party, 46% expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of meetings and 44% were dissatisfied with messaging groups.

Participants in the employee engagement forum provided insights into the reasons behind the high dissatisfaction levels. For example, in relation to company events, participants reported a number of difficulties. There was a view that the unwritten rules of the workplace can inhibit involvement, while the events can seem 'forced' and often are poorly attended.

Forum participants also expressed a determination to maintain a work/life balance, suggesting that they perceived these events as encroaching on their time outside work.

In assessing corporate events they viewed as successes, they pointed to a number of factors that helped to ensure those events worked well, including:

- the events were organised in such a way that they did not lead to additional workload stress;
- there was evidence of a clear commitment by the company to the success of the event through provision of time off to attend and 'free stuff'; and,
- the events were built around a clearly-defined common objective that made the decision to get involved easier.

The expert group emphasises the importance of these considerations and Dr Mark Ward of the expert group notes that a defined common objective has a unifying effect: "This sense of a shared purpose brings the group together."

Close cooperation

Despite the strong dissatisfaction among corporate employees across a range of workplace interactions, four out of five nonetheless report that they are able to work effectively with colleagues to collectively solve problems (for more on the apparent divergence in these findings, see panel, Team players? page 10).

Overall, the research shows that corporate employees have experienced positive interactions in the workplace to a great extent in two contexts: professionally, within close-knit groups when they have clearly identified objectives and socially, alongside close colleagues with whom they have developed a sense of trust.

There is a strong positive response to the day-to-day practicalities of interactional working and socialising with co-workers in pursuit of a specific purpose. Interestingly, expert group member Professor Richard Layte notes that small close-knit teams have some corporate pedigree in terms of displaying effectiveness and productivity: "We saw changes in HR in the 1980s, largely reflecting Japanese experience, where small groups and teams not only produced more, but also produced better."

The comments from forum participants reflected this positive view of close colleagues working together effectively. They reported a strong desire to communicate diligence, professionalism and conscientiousness in their interactions in this context. They also demonstrated a strong focus on fulfilling role objectives and, within the team framework, saw interactions with colleagues as primarily purpose-driven, i.e., working together for a shared objective.

The forum also identified some typical characteristics of relationships in these problem-solving groups. Participants indicated that they tended to gravitate towards colleagues with shared perspectives. Factors such as age, gender and general interests, such as TV and sports, helped to establish rapport and build relationships, i.e., tending toward the professional end of the professional/social axis in the workplace relationship map. Simple physical proximity can also play a role. As one forum member reported: "I find working closely with people, say on a project or in training a new hire, can bring you closer together."

Team players?

The apparently contradictory findings in relation to team-working with fellow corporate employees are particularly thought-provoking. On the one hand, 81% of corporate employees agree that they are able to work effectively with their co-workers to collectively solve problems. At the same time, 41% assert that they are extremely dissatisfied with team-working relationships.

While there could be several possible explanations for these divergent findings, two in particular suggest themselves. Most obviously, people may feel they are able to work effectively with fellow team members even though they are dissatisfied with their relationships with those colleagues. While these are not optimal conditions for effective team-working, this is certainly a plausible conclusion.

However, the proposition seems less persuasive when you take into account the prevalence of friendship among corporate employees (70% report forming friendships at work) and the degree of trust that exists between them (65% trust co-workers a great deal).

More likely, given the levels of disillusionment with corporate modes of communication, the 'teamwork relationship' is being understood to refer to corporately selected teams, perhaps for ad hoc projects. Essentially, teams that are perceived as chosen on a 'top-down' basis, rather than developing more 'organically' as say, in the case of colleagues who work in close proximity and have developed relationships based on professional and social interactions over time.

While various explanations are open to speculation, what is clear is that the concept of 'teams' and 'teamwork' is one where a gap in meaning has developed between what a company may intend and what its employees understand, a pattern that recurs elsewhere in the workplace and is at the root of the proliferation of many unwritten rules (see page 17).

Work relationships (Pre Covid):
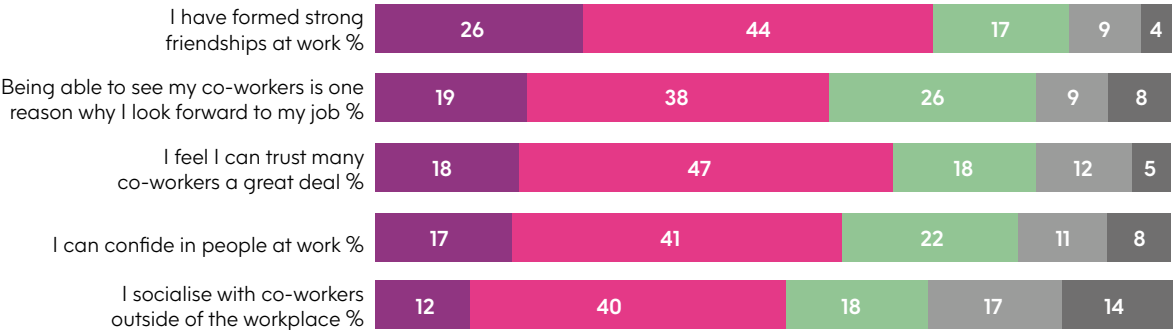## Friendship opportunity/Friendship prevalence*

Base: Corporate employees n= 434

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?**

Friendship opportunity

I am able to work with my co-workers to collectively solve problems %
| 32 | 49 | 9 | 6 | 3 |

Communication among employees is encouraged by my organisation %
| 27 | 41 | 19 | 8 | 6 |

Friendship prevalence

I have formed strong friendships at work %
| 26 | 44 | 17 | 9 | 4 |

Being able to see my co-workers is one reason why I look forward to my job %
| 19 | 38 | 26 | 9 | 8 |

I feel I can trust many co-workers a great deal %
| 18 | 47 | 18 | 12 | 5 |

I can confide in people at work %
| 17 | 41 | 22 | 11 | 8 |

I socialise with co-workers outside of the workplace %
| 12 | 40 | 18 | 17 | 14 |

Despite our dissatisfaction with modes of corporate interaction, our work relationships, especially in relation to friendship prevalence appear strong.

- Agree strongly
- Agree slightly
- Neither agree or disagree
- Disagree slightly
- Disagree strongly
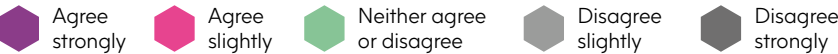
*Adapted from Neilsen et al work relationship opportunity + prevalence.

In conjunction with a strongly positive view of working with colleagues on purpose-driven, problem-solving activities, there is a strong prevalence of close relationships and friendships in the workplace.

In all, 70% of respondents to the quantitative research said they had formed strong friendships at work. A total of 57% of corporate employees agreed that seeing co-workers was one reason why they looked forward to their jobs. The consistent strength of this response was notable with corporate employees also stating they felt they could trust many workers a great deal (65%) and confide in people at work (58%).

The positive findings in relation to trust among employees are particularly welcome, according to the expert group. The confidence created by a sense of trust has positive implications for corporate employee well-being and for workplace performance. According to Dr Van Der Werff: "Workplaces that have high levels of trust and trusting cultures tend to have much higher levels of positive emotion and much higher levels of motivation, higher levels of performance and higher levels of well-being. Conversely, when there is low trust, all of the cognitive space and the time that they should be spending doing a good job or having fun with their colleagues, or any of those things, is spent just protecting themselves or watching out for ways that people could potentially get them."

The expert group says there is substantial research suggesting that having someone who you consider to be a friend in the workplace is associated with better well-being outcomes and increased productivity. These positive relationships at work provide regular social engagement and a sense of psychological safety.

The group also noted that these relationships created and reinforced a sense of belonging to a sub-culture, a common subsidiary culture within the wider company culture. The positive relationships within these sub-cultures had established rituals such as daily greetings and in-group conversation topics. The rituals provide comfort and are essential to the building and maintenance of rapport, according to the expert group. For most, feeling part of community rituals is central to having positive social experiences in the workplace.

Indeed encouraging 'friendships' between employees is often a goal for organisations. However, the expert group does sound a note of caution; close relationships between employees are not always beneficial. Close relationships can:

- increase the likelihood for conflict;
- inhibit the ability to voice dissatisfaction; and,
- facilitate 'unprofessional' interactions.

Recent research shows that friendships can come at a price in a workplace context. There is a need to define a 'sweet spot' rather than assume the goal is always closer ties to colleagues.

3. Rules of engagement

## How the corporate workplace shapes the quality of interaction

A lack of clarity of intention in workplace design and company culture drives corporate employee dissatisfaction with interactions in the workplace.

The workplace plays a powerful role in shaping the quality of interactions that occur within it, both as a physical space and as the venue in which a company's culture, its explicit and implicit values, operates. In the previous chapter, we noted how dissatisfied corporate employees are with wider working relationships, company events and meetings. However, they are also dissatisfied with less formal occasions for interaction such as coffee breaks (41%) and lunch breaks (39%). And even casual greetings and equivalent interactions in the workplace are experienced as extremely dissatisfying by 37%.

In our mapping of interactions at work (page 7), coffee breaks and lunch breaks are located in the casual social quadrant of workplace relationships and generally are experienced in the company of close colleagues with whom, as detailed in the previous chapter, corporate employees enjoy a high degree of trust and friendship. Ostensibly, these interactions should be more satisfying. So why is this not the case?

Design challenges

Physical spatial design has a clear impact on how social encounters occur, the expert group note. The nature of casual social conversations and 'bumping-into-one-another' encounters underlines the importance of appropriate design and location of workplace amenities and facilities. The forum participants reported that the majority of their casual interactions in the workplace occur organically by chance. These casual encounters take place at the water cooler, passing by desks, getting a coffee or going to the bathroom. A typical comment made by a participant was: "I'd always ask our department if anyone wants a coffee… and sometimes someone will come with me for the walk/chat on the way which is nice."
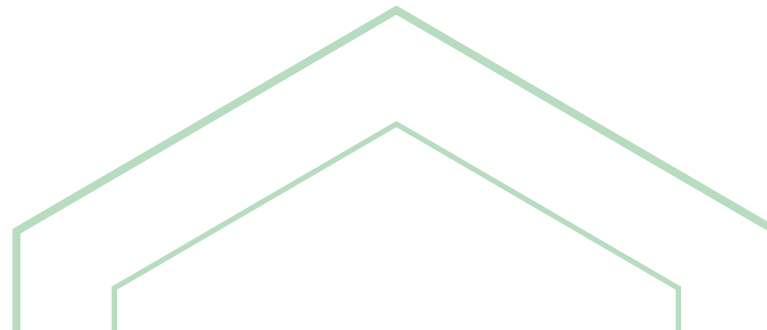
The layout and location of canteens and dining spaces are part of a wider design challenge to facilitate opportunities for informal interactions across workplace spaces. The expert group point out that appropriately designed spaces can act as a catalyst to enhance the quality of interactions. It is critical in the context of supporting sociability in the workplace to be aware that the design of some work spaces encourage employees to cross paths and interact, while others can create isolating 'silos'.

The objective is to encourage casual social interactions which are goal-demoted, i.e., there are no obvious sub-goals. Where there are sub-goals, the mode of the interaction becomes less clear – is it predominantly social or professional?

According to the expert group, employees should be given the opportunity to allow interactions to occur organically. Assistant Professor Garrett outlines what he considers a priority in making space for social engagement: "I think it is about creating spaces where people can be people. But I would say it is not just about designing physical spaces but also about creating the temporal space that will allow people to have the time to just be themselves with each other. I think this facility, to have the time to interact, is one of the most important things in relationships."

Achieving a balance

There is a delicate balance to be struck, according to the expert group. Over-engineering a space or inappropriate designation of the use of a space, can evoke among corporate employees the sense of being manipulated into a manufactured conversation or 'forced chit-chat'. This is likely to have the opposite of its intended effect.

Equally, if the location for a casual interaction is highly visible, how is its use perceived by employees? Do they have to feel they have professionally 'earned' the time to spend in the casual space?

Although workplace design can nudge people towards casual sociable behaviour, it is important that it is not perceived to be attempting to compel such interaction. Equally, in creating a space for casual social engagement, it is important not to convey, by any vagueness or lack of specificity in communication, an unintended message that its use is being discouraged, as in, for example, the notion that 'go-ahead, ambitious employees' wouldn't want to be seen using it. Based on the dissatisfactions outlined in our research, this balance is not yet being achieved.
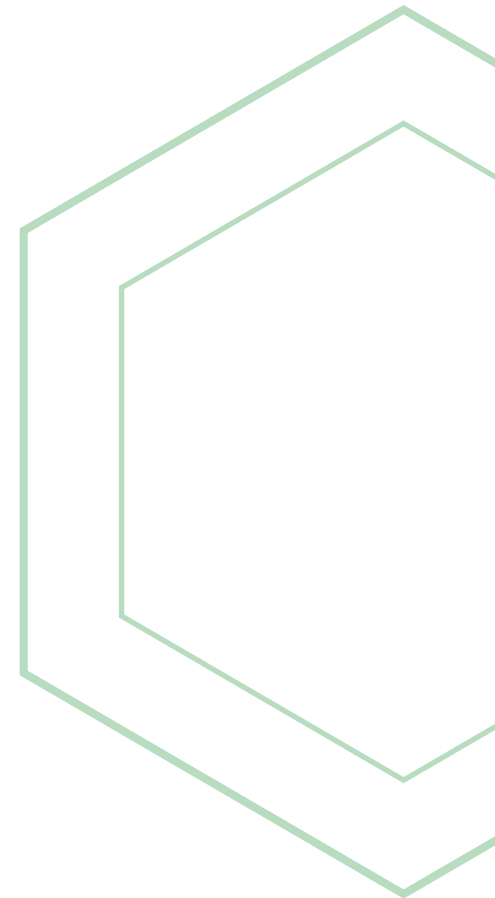
Communication gap

Employee perceptions in relation to corporate encouragement of communication is more positive as the status of the employee rises, peaking at intermediate managerial/professional/administrative level. Of employees at this level, 76% believe that communication is encouraged by their organisations. This falls to 59% among those at entry level.

Taken in conjunction with the dissatisfaction expressed by respondents in relation to wider working relationships with other departments, it supports the idea that there is an uneven quality to the clarity of communication strategies across corporate organisations; the type of communication deficit that the expert group has identified as a critical factor in the development of unwritten rules with their consequent negative implications for social engagement. In the context of shaping a workplace that encourages more positive social engagement, the expert group lists enhanced clarity of communication as a key recommendation.

Summary agree (by statement)	Total	Employment Level			
		Higher managerial/ professional/ administrative	Intermediate managerial/ professional/ administrative	Supervisory or clerical; junior manager/ professional/ administrative	Any other full time/part time employment
	434	33*	154	159	88
	%	%	%	%	%
Friendship opportunity					
Communication among employees is encouraged by my organisation	68	67	76	65	59
I am able to work with my co-workers to collectively solve problems	81	88	86	78	76
Friendship prevalence					
I have formed strong friendships at work	70	70	74	69	66
I socialise with co-workers outside of the workplace	52	58	58	48	43
I can confide in people at work	59	70	62	57	51
I feel I can trust many co-workers a great deal	64	76	70	60	58
Being able to see my co-workers is one reason why I look forward to my job	57	55	61	56	55

The responses to both the friendship opportunity and friendship prevalence criteria improve as employees rise in status.
* Caution lower base.

Company culture

To fully understand the high levels of dissatisfaction with social corporate interaction, it is necessary to look beyond the design of work and leisure spaces and explore the blind spots of company culture in the workplace, more particularly, the corporate communications gaps that give rise to so-called unwritten rules.

Despite most corporate employers having a set of clearly defined values or a mission statement, the behaviours and routines followed by employees often do not align with these 'official' statements of intent.

Employees are far more likely to follow the patterns of behaviour of colleagues around them. These patterns reflect what employees consider are implicit corporate expectations, unstated but evident in work practices, attitudes and perceptions around what is required to be successful in the company. The 'grapevine' often fuels what is expected in terms of how employees interact with certain work colleagues.

In the gap that opens between the written rules and corporate employee perceptions, a void is generated which staff fill in with their assumptions based on their observations of general employee behaviour and what they see as the employer's performance expectations.

Examples of unwritten rules that attract strong allegiance among corporate employees are:

- regardless of how productive your day has been, if you regularly leave the office before most of your co-workers, you are labelled as lazy or lacking drive (over half of corporate employees agreed with this statement);
- asking your employer for support with a mental health problem, would negatively impact your career (41% agreed with this);
- working from home has quickly given rise to an unwritten rule of its own — a third of corporate employees agree that, after the pandemic, continuing to work from home will negatively impact career prospects; and,
- you appear less committed if you use social facilities in your office during the working day (29% agreed with this).

The unwritten rules present a major challenge to any corporate strategy aimed at enhancing corporate employee health and well-being. And for an employee who may already have issues around sociability, the challenge is even greater.

To put it in perspective, expert group member Francis Cleary, Founder of Step Out Ireland, says: "If someone has social anxiety and isn't comfortable talking about it, then they are not going to report they have social anxiety at work."

Unwritten rules

Base: Corporate employees n=434

⬢ Any agree %

Statement	Value
Regardless of how productive your day was, if you regularly **leave the office before most of your co-workers**, you can get labelled as lazy or lacking drive	51
Asking your employer for support with a **mental health problem**, would negatively impact your career	41
Working part time or remotely for any length of time will negatively impact how you are perceived in your company	38
When Ireland gets back to some normal way of life following the Covid-19 Lockdown, **continuing to work from home** will negatively impact your career prospects	32
If you don't **spend time with your co-workers outside the office**, you don't appear engaged and committed	31
While you may have **social facilities** in your office (such as yoga classes, chill out rooms, gyms etc.), you appear less committed if you use them during the working day	29
Staff are not supported when participating in **corporate social responsibility** activities (volunteering, charitable giving)	28
You are expected to **respond to work emails** late at night/weekends	26
There is an expectation you will not take your full allotment of **holidays**	23

51% of corporate employees agree that working late or indeed leaving early continues to convey strong messages about commitment. In relation to working from home, 32% believe continuing to do so post Covid-19 will negatively impact your career prospects.

The power of the unwritten rule manifests itself in many ways. As we have seen in previous *Vhi Health Insights* papers, technology has led to the development of the phenomenon of 'work practice creep', with work steadily encroaching on personal time. Neither a planned strategy by employers, nor a desired outcome for staff, this trend was accentuated during maximum Covid-19 restrictions, where daily patterns were disrupted without a clear sense of 'new rules of engagement' (see Chapter 4). A depth interview respondent could not have stated more clearly their impression of what was expected: "There is an unwritten rule that you are connected all the time."

These rules can also shape behaviours in relation to the use of onsite facilities. In all, 29% of corporate employees believe that if you have social facilities in your office, you appear less committed if you use them during the working day.

Responses to the forum indicated that expectations derived from the unwritten rules can affect whether corporate employees even make the initial choice to use these facilities. Commenting on facilities at their company, one forum participant said:

"Most people are too afraid to take time away from their desk to use the benefits."

Expert group member and eMental Health Programme Manager at Jigsaw, Naoise Kavanagh, has seen examples of the inhibitions that can arise in relation to initiatives intended to benefit employees: "In one workplace, employees were all offered 10 weeks paid leave if they had young children. Nobody is taking up the offer because they believe if they did, they wouldn't have a job to come back to."

Most of the unwritten rules are long-established but the working from home response to the Covid-19 lockdown has already generated at least one of its own, as mentioned earlier; one third of corporate employees agree that, after the lockdown, continuing to work from home will negatively impact career prospects.

To counter the development of unwritten rules around corporate facilities and amenities, the messaging around them must prioritise clarity according to the expert group. There are subtle but clear differences between the relatively unengaging statement of permission 'You are free to use this gym' and the more direct invitation 'We want you to use this gym'. The former appears to leave much unsaid from the corporate employee's perspective (most importantly, perhaps, 'Does the employer actually want me to use this facility?'), while the latter is unequivocal and does not leave a gap for the employee to imagine or seek out unwritten rules.
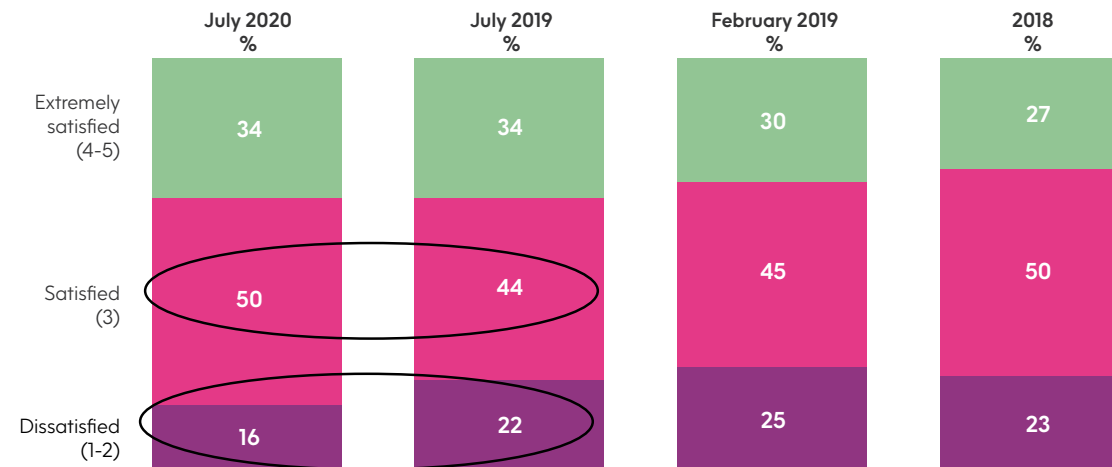
4. Working from home

Social engagement declines during lockdown while professional relationships improve

Corporate employees report that their professional social interactions have improved and there has been a decline in dissatisfaction with work/life balance during the period of most severe Covid-19 restrictions, the lockdown.

Satisfaction with work/life balance

Base: Corporate employees n=434

	July 2020 %	July 2019 %	February 2019 %	2018 %
Extremely satisfied (4-5)	34	34	30	27
Satisfied (3)	50	44	45	50
Dissatisfied (1-2)	16	22	25	23

The incidence of corporate employees who are dissatisfied with their work/life balance has declined to 16% during lockdown.

The advent of Covid-19, in the midst of the period in which research was carried out for this paper, radically altered the work landscape for corporate employees and saw an unprecedented increase in the numbers working from home. The framework for social engagement was altered with video conferencing facilitating inter-colleague communication as never before and a major shift away from the kind of social encounters that had been common in the workplace.

In what might be considered a surprising finding, a third of employees reported that their professional relationships had actually improved in these extraordinary circumstances. There was a strong view that workplace communications and workload distributions had actually improved.

In all, 40% reported that communication with their boss or immediate supervisor got better during the lockdown. Almost as many (38%) found that team communication

had improved and 32% found that there had been an improvement in the distribution of workload.

At first glance, the positive findings might seem counter-intuitive, but the attitudes and experiences reflected in the digital diary in which corporate employees tracked their social experience under lockdown, reveals some interesting dynamics at play.

How the nature of interactions changed under lockdown

The lockdown digital diaries reveal a positive attitude to technology in evident contrast with corporate employee views expressed in earlier reports in the *Vhi Health Insights* series. Whereas in the past there was a conflicted sense of 'addiction' to social media and a view of technology as a contributor to feelings of stress, lockdown attitudes toward technology were largely positive and focused on its benefits in keeping people in touch.

The expert group observes that the use of technology during lockdown dramatically changed how employees interacted with each other. The large majority of discussions became primarily purposeful and 'chit-chat' was less likely.

The result was that the modes of interaction were predominantly professional and, therefore, the conversations which took place had a great degree of clarity.

The lockdown digital diaries also convey a sense of how the quality of social engagement was diminished by the greater use of technology and also by the absence of cultural and sporting events, a popular focus for conversational topics.

The expert group notes that it is challenging to generate high-quality occasions and opportunities for sociable behaviour — without having them feel forced — at the best of times and even more so in the context of a lockdown. In particular, it is challenging to establish informal communications in a virtual setting. As Professor Fred Zijlstra of the expert group explains: "Employees are far less likely to report issues online as only work is discussed. Informal conversations are unlikely to occur unless planned and the 'social oil' of the organisation suffers."

Meet-ups felt forced and there was obviously difficulty in facilitating the community rituals of the physical workplace (daily greetings, in-group conversation topics, coffee breaks) that create and reinforce a sense of belonging within a sub-culture which is so important to positive social interaction. According to the expert group, the guiding principle for corporate organisations should be, to take an 'opt in' approach.

Working from home also accelerated the trend in work practice creep (page 21), further blurring the lines between what is work and what is non-work. Naoise Kavanagh commented: "One significant concern about the current situation is how our home lives and our work lives have blended into one. The circumstances have generated different sorts of expectations, both in terms of employee expectations and management expectations and knowing where the boundaries lie."

Working from home

Working from home during Covid-19

Base: Newly working from home = 234

Summary agree (by statement)	Total	Gender		Age		Region		Children	
		Male	Female	18-45	46+	Dublin	Ex Dublin	Any children	No children
UNWTD	234	104	130	192	42	105	129	135	99
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
When things are back to normal, **I would like to continue working from home** more than I was before the Covid-19 outbreak	78	75	80	78	76	73	81	81	74
I have the **equipment I need** at home to do my job	76	72	80	76	79	73	79	79	73
I typically work **more effectively on my own**	73	74	72	72	76	69	76	76	68
I have a convenient, quiet place to work at home	71	71	72	70	76	70	72	73	69
My job is **as easy to do at home** as it is in the workplace	65	64	66	64	71	65	66	67	63
My **workload has increased** since the Covid-19 outbreak	51	54	49	52	50	47	55	52	51
The **quality of my work has suffered** as a result of working from home	32	36	29	34	24	30	34	38	24

Among those newly working from home, there was a positive response to the experience. In all, 78% of these employees would consider working from home more and one in four were strongly in favour of doing so. The positive assessment of working from home is largely consistent among the demographic groups, but the desire to work from home post Covid rises to 81% of corporate employees with children and ex Dublin. Significantly, 71% reported they had a convenient, quiet place to work at home and 76% said they had the equipment they needed to do their job.

Self-sufficient?

One of the most interesting findings in relation to working from home was that 72% of corporate employees believed that they worked more effectively on their own, with half of this number being strongly of this view.

This is particularly interesting when looked at in conjunction with the positive response to the focus on professional interaction in technology-led communication during the lockdown. It suggests that the move to working from home, at least during the period studied, had eliminated some of the complexities associated with the physical workplace, including the ambiguities generated by overlapping professional/social interactions.
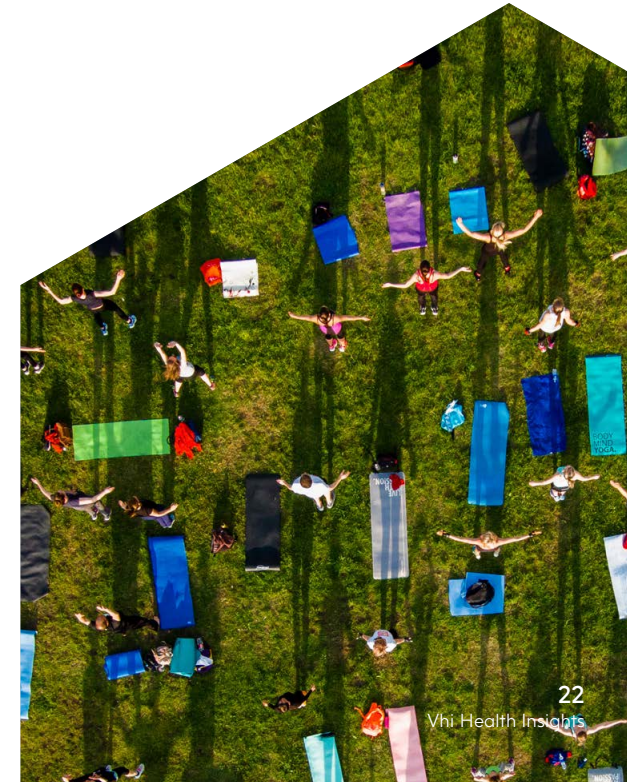
However, there were two potentially troubling findings within what was a largely positive response. Just over half of those newly working from home reported that their workload had increased and – despite the confidence expressed by the strong cohort that believe they work better alone – a significant minority (32%) believed that the quality of their work was suffering as a result of working from home. These findings point to potential challenges ahead.

Adapting to the 'new normal'

It is interesting to note how new routines and a different sense of time created the space for some unexpected benefits. Under lockdown, for instance, some diarists found they had more time to reflect and share memories of the past; partly, they admitted, to avoid talking about Covid-19. There has also been a more deliberate effort to maintain and renew contacts with old friends and close relatives.
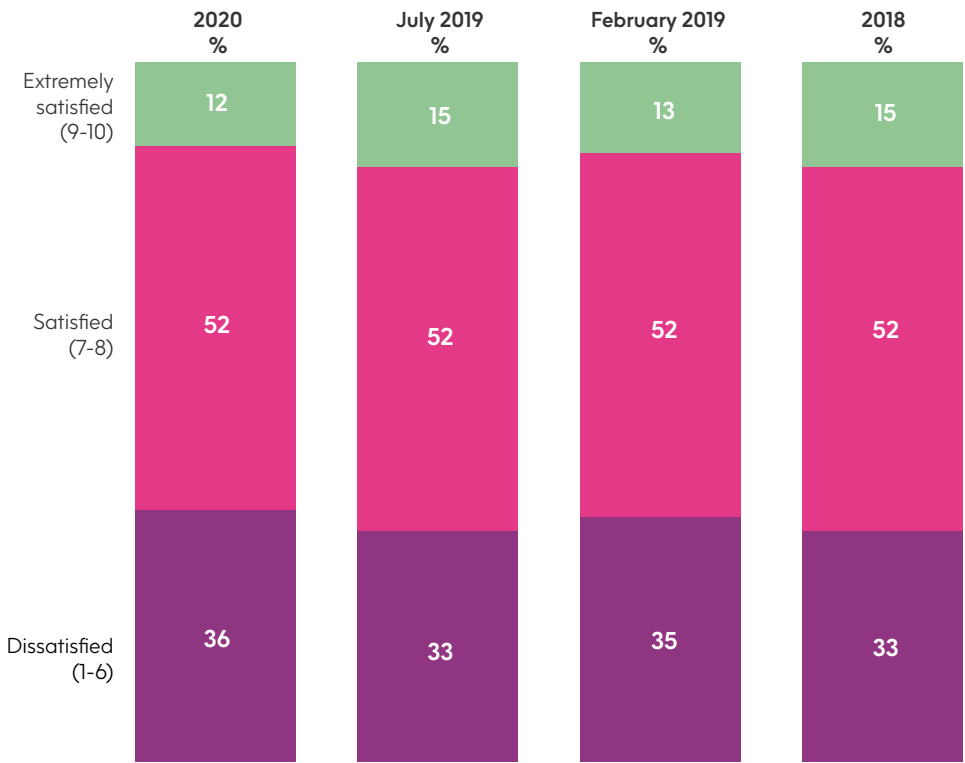
While most identify a mix of impacts, both good and bad, some underlying concerns were evident in their responses, including:

- the physical strain resulting from the poor ergonomics of makeshift work desk set-ups in the home environment;
- tensions building within households; and,
- concern about the long-term curtailment of physical contact.

Current satisfaction with life as a whole

Base: Corporate employees n=434

	2020 %	July 2019 %	February 2019 %	2018 %
Extremely satisfied (9-10)	12	15	13	15
Satisfied (7-8)	52	52	52	52
Dissatisfied (1-6)	36	33	35	33

Despite the extraordinary public health conditions, the rating of life satisfaction shows only a slight decline versus previous reports.

Alongside this paper's focus on social engagement, the *Vhi Health Insights* series, as a multi-phase project, has continued to track behavioural measures in relation to the health and wellness of corporate employees over the past two years. The data from this research offers a useful opportunity to compare life satisfaction levels before and during the Covid-19 outbreak. Interestingly, despite the unprecedented public health measures and extraordinary working conditions, the rating of life satisfaction shows only a slight decline versus previous findings during the past two years. This reflects the generally positive reaction to working from home as indicated elsewhere in this chapter.
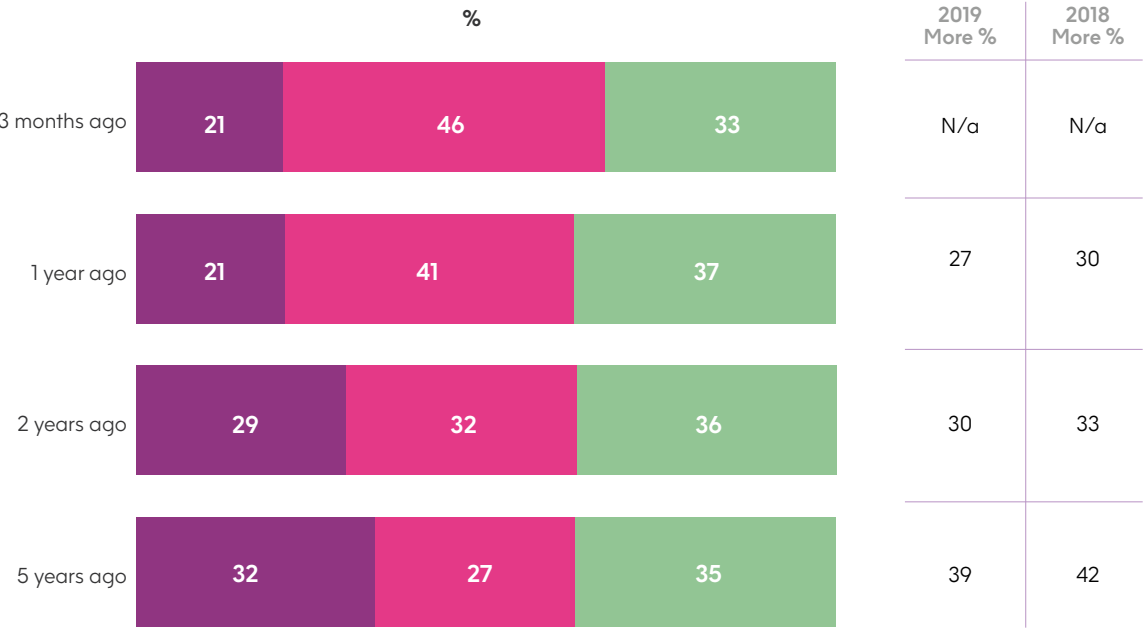
Simultaneously, the ongoing research indicates that corporate employees increasingly feel more stressed than three months ago, one year ago and two years ago. Again, a likely contributory factor has been the lack of opportunities for goal-demoted interactions during the lockdown as highlighted in this chapter.

Throughout the *Vhi Health Insights* series, approximately one in five respondents have consistently identified as part of the high stress group. This is a group that consistently experience stressors more intensely than other respondents, including the perception of accelerating stress referred to above. In 2020, this high stress group continued to constitute 20% of all corporate employees in our research cohort.

The increase in satisfaction with life and the greater experience of stress represent potentially significant behavioural trends. However, given that the research was carried out in the early months of the outbreak, at this stage it may be too early to consider them conclusive.

Stress: Current vs previous levels

Base: Corporate employees n=434

	%			2019 More %	2018 More %
3 months ago	21	46	33	N/a	N/a
1 year ago	21	41	37	27	30
2 years ago	29	32	36	30	33
5 years ago	32	27	35	39	42

Despite the largely stable life satisfaction measures, our assessment of relative stress levels has become more negative — we increasingly feel we are more stressed than *three months ago, one year ago* and *two years ago*.

⬡ Less   ⬡ About the same   ⬡ More

5. Rewriting the rules

## The promotion of quality moments of interaction within an evolving workplace

Contrasting the lockdown experiences of corporate employees with their responses prior to lockdown serves to highlight pivotal factors that have implications for ongoing mental health and well-being in particular the impact of unwritten rules on the quality of social engagement.

The suite of research approaches applied to social engagement among corporate employees produced a multi-faceted accumulation of data, which was given added complexity and richness when the unprecedented circumstances precipitated by Covid-19 brought sweeping changes to society, including the workplace. The resulting findings provide an enhanced understanding of the dynamics of two distinct work environments (pre-Covid-19 and the specific lockdown period at the beginning of the outbreak in Ireland) that will help inform health and well-being responses around work-related social engagement, both in the short-to-medium term while we are 'living with' the virus and beyond.

Unwritten rules: clarity v. confusion

Pre-Covid, high levels of dissatisfaction were evident across all workplace activities where professional and social interactions operated in tandem and with different degrees of ambiguity or opaqueness. From a corporate employee perspective, the confusion that arises where social interactions incorporate goal-motivated (professional) and goal-demoted (casual) aspects provides the setting for a proliferation of unwritten rules.

By contrast, the technology-led approach to communication during lockdown and the absence of events that offered ambiguous mixes of professional and casual social interaction (workplace meetings, compulsory company events) rendered most of the unwritten rules irrelevant. This new-found clarity resulted in a rise in satisfaction with working life. This was enhanced by a strong sense among corporate employees that they were able to work better on their own.
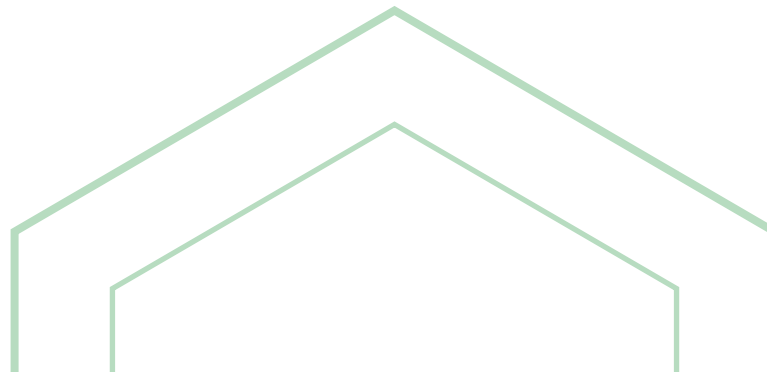
Worrying signs

Assessment of professional relationships post-Covid

Base: Corporate employees n=434

%

With line manager/ immediate manager

| 12 | 52 | 35 |

Work colleagues

| 15 | 48 | 36 |

1 in 3 corporate employees feel their professional relations have gotten better during lockdown.

⬡ Summary worse   ⬡ Same   ⬡ Summary better

While those newly working from home were largely positive in relation to a new clarity around communication and their professional interactions, their responses also signalled concerns that a new set of unwritten rules are asserting themselves. In the absence of the opportunity to display productivity in the communal workplace, employees are developing new cues to indicate their level of activity while working from home. These include:

- getting back to emails instantly;
- use of the green status icon on digital chat facilities; and,
- sending or replying to emails out of work hours.

Alongside the development of new unwritten rules, lockdown saw an inevitable decline in the sub-cultures and their associated rituals that encourage high-quality social interaction. Daily community rituals (greetings, coffee breaks etc.) have been disrupted. Casual and spontaneous conversation do not materialise as easily when working from home.

The lockdown has brought into sharp relief the value of workplace relationships and interactions. This is highlighted by significant increases in dissatisfaction levels with mental health (up to 41% extremely dissatisfied) and of course, social life (up to 62% extremely dissatisfied).

Finding 'the sweet spot'

The expert group note the contribution that the corporate workplace has already made in bringing corporate employee health and well-being issues to the fore in Ireland. Expert group member Tomás Sercovich, CEO, Business in the Community Ireland, comments: "There is a strong shift towards a focus on wellness in corporate Ireland. The FDI world has brought innovative thinking and groundbreaking initiatives like 'Great Place To Work' to Ireland."

Closing the gap between company culture and the deep culture hidden within it — characterised by unwritten rules, misconceptions and assumptions — represents a key challenge to be addressed and, according to the expert group, an opportunity for further innovations in advancing corporate employee health and well-being.

To decrease the proliferation of unwritten rules and develop greater clarity of communication in the workplace, the expert group notes that the first crucial principle is to realise that the simple provision of a facility is not sufficient. It is important to demonstrate clearly that a company culture supports social activities and that this is communicated without ambiguity.

A fundamental building block of positive social encounters is trust. Transparency is a vital element in creating trust — let employees know not just what is planned but why it has been initiated. Social interaction initiatives should be grounded in insights around corporate employees' needs. There should be a conscious effort on the part of the employer to align written and unwritten rules based around clear objectives in relation to wellness performance goals. Organisations need to be cognisant that in the absence of clarity 'unwritten rules' become established as 'norms'. There is a need for radical clarity and consistency.

It is important to address areas of work practice that have developed based on assumed 'expectations' with overt policy statements backed up by what the expert group specify should be quite rigid new rules (with explanations as to why they are being introduced). There is a need for unwavering commitment at all levels, organisational and sub-cultural. This will require both line manager training and development of a 'new vernacular' for sub-culture interactions where a colleague may 'call out' inappropriate work practice.

The importance of meaning

The expert group was of the view that the power of positive social engagement to promote well-being was strongly tied to the meaning that employees attributed to those interactions.

It is essential that social interactions generate a feeling of being recognised and valued and that there is a wider sense of being in alignment with group goals. These can be powerful motivators, not least as they are hard wired into the way our social brains operate. An underlying sense of shared purpose is a fundamental component of effective group cohesion. These requirements have clear implications for both senior and line management, according to the expert group.

In this regard, the group believe that corporate initiatives to set up group activities with an altruistic purpose for employees can be among the most beneficial for promoting well-being; specifically, volunteering and CSR activities have the potential to deliver strong social benefits for corporate employees. Dr Mark Ward sees volunteering as a particularly worthwhile framework within which to approach social interaction initiatives: "There is plenty of evidence that people in this country are strongly attracted to the concept of volunteering. There are really high rates of participation. Among the over-50s, just over 40% volunteer. It is pretty much an integral part of Irish society."

Volunteering and CSR have a wide range of potential benefits, according to the expert group, including enhancing an individual employee's sense of self-worth and establishing stronger bonds between colleagues both outside the work environment and within it.

A social prescription for mental health

The practice of social prescribing, i.e., social interaction as a treatment option for well-being, has already been introduced, at least in pilot form, across the Republic of Ireland. This has initially involved providing primary healthcare providers with lists of activities such as running or hobbies in their immediate area so they can prescribe these to patients.

Social prescribing is well-established in the UK, where an established facet of the treatment involves the GP referring a patient to a link worker. This is a critical aspect of the system as the link worker offers a more lengthy meeting for assessment of the individual's life as a whole. The link worker can then tailor recommendations/ links to social experiences and supports that are relevant and appropriate. It has been seen to be beneficial if the link worker comes from the same community as the patient – that way there is better understanding of what is culturally appropriate.

The expert group believe this practice could be adapted successfully to a corporate setting. Expert group member Dr. Marie Polley says that a corporate champion is essential: "You need a leader who is behind it and all the management also need to be on board."

Home work: lessons for the future

In conclusion, working from home looks set to be the norm for many corporate workers for the foreseeable future. Our research and the insights of the expert group identify some key takeaway findings on the implications of this new reality for corporate employee well-being, in particular:

- the technology-led aspects of working from home present opportunities to enhance the corporate employee's sense of autonomy;

- a pathway is available to improve professional relationships through the increased clarity of communication with supervisors and within teams, driven by professional interaction via digital tools;

- there is cause for concern at the lack of opportunities for social engagement with colleagues when working from home and the consequent implications for health and well-being — a predominance of professional interaction will also make it much less likely that corporate employees will report health and well-being issues, according to the expert group;

- employers face a new challenge in promoting social encounters and conversations via digital tools; and,

- there is significant potential for greater issues arising in relation to work/life balance through increased work loads and further blurring of the work/life distinction as the work space moves further into the home space.

6. Framework for Social Connection

Now more than ever, organisations are measured by the value and culture they create for their employees. The social relationships within an organisation help define the organisation's capabilities. Therefore, it is essential to think about Social Capital as a means to broaden your focus and invest appropriately in your people and the relationships between them.

Strong social connection in the work environment contributes to:

- Better work performance
- Improved physical & mental health
- Reduced stress
- Increased happiness

Poor social connection + virtual working could lead to:

- Increased distraction and focus on oneself
- Lack of communication and cooperation
- Less connection between employees
- Reduced sense of commitment

To reap the benefits of this research and prepare for the future of the workplace, you should consider appointing a **Social Connection Facilitator**. This person will be responsible for shaping the culture, implementing a framework and ensuring that the working environment is always optimised to enhance social connectedness.

Why is this important?

Strengthening social connection improves your employees' overall performance, mental health and physical health. It also reduces stress or burnout and increases happiness.

This framework can help you to create a socially connected organisation by focusing on three main aspects - **culture, communities & activities**

Step 01 - Culture

How to shape the character and atmosphere of your organisation

- Reinforce trust and a sense of connection
- Be open and transparent
- Build strong communication strategies
- Develop a listening culture
- Encourage focused attention

Step 02 - Communities

How to strengthen existing relationships and help create new ones

- Leverage sport, social and interest groups
- Preserve teams with long working relationships
- Create safe spaces to communicate openly
- Create communities within an organisation
- Connect mentors, mentees, peers and colleagues

Step 03 - Activities

How to support social connection in other ways

- Recognise personal events and achievements
- Enhance connection with weekly check-ins
- Allow time in meetings for social connection

Key statistics

78%

among those newly working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic, 78% would consider working from home more

70%

have formed strong friendships at work

51%

are dissatisfied with the quality of interaction in wider working relationships such as inter-departmental meetings

Half

are dissatisfied with traditional events that may be perceived as compulsory, such as the Christmas party

29%

believe they appear less committed if they use social facilities in the office during the working day

Opportunities and challenges in working from home

The Covid-19 outbreak has seen wider adoption of working from home. Within this new work reality, our research and the expert group's insights have identified opportunities to enhance corporate employee well-being as well as the emergence of significant challenges that could negatively impact on it. They include:

Opportunities

1 **An opportunity to enhance the corporate employee's sense of autonomy**
Using the home location to build on a sense of control over one's work.

2 **A pathway to improved professional relationships**
Based on increased communication clarity driven by professional interaction via digital tools.

Challenges

3 **A lack of opportunity for social engagement with colleagues**
The curtailment of a key factor in employee health and well-being.

4 **A challenge to promote casual social encounters and conversations**
The need for the employer to support social engagement via digital tools.

5 **A greater disruption to work/life balance**
The result of increased work loads and further blurring of the work/life distinction as work space merges with home space.

Appendix

The Quantitative Survey

The quantitative survey focused on those up to 45 years working in the corporate sector (100+ employees), with a comparative sample of corporate employees aged 46-65 years.

Sample Profile

Base: Corporate employees n=434

		%
Gender	Male	49
	Female	51
Age	-34 years	30
	35-44 years	46
	45-65 years	24
Region	Dublin	37
	Ex Dublin	63

		%
Children	Any children	61
	No children	39
Company Size	100-249	34
	250+	66
Work Status	Higher Managerial	8
	Intermediate	35
	Supervisory	37
	Other	20

Qualitative Research

The qualitative research comprised of an integrative approach across a number of methodologies, including:

- interviews with the employee engagement expert group.
- An online forum consisting of responses to a daily questionnaire from corporate employees.
- A digital diary kept by corporate employees.
- In-depth one to one interviews with corporate employees.

Social interactions expert group

Francis Cleary, Founder Step Out Ireland.

Lyndon Garrett, Assistant Professor, Organizational Behaviour and Theory, Boston College.

Dr Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Department of Psychology, Brigham Young University.

Naoise Kavanagh, eMental Health Programme Manager, Jigsaw.

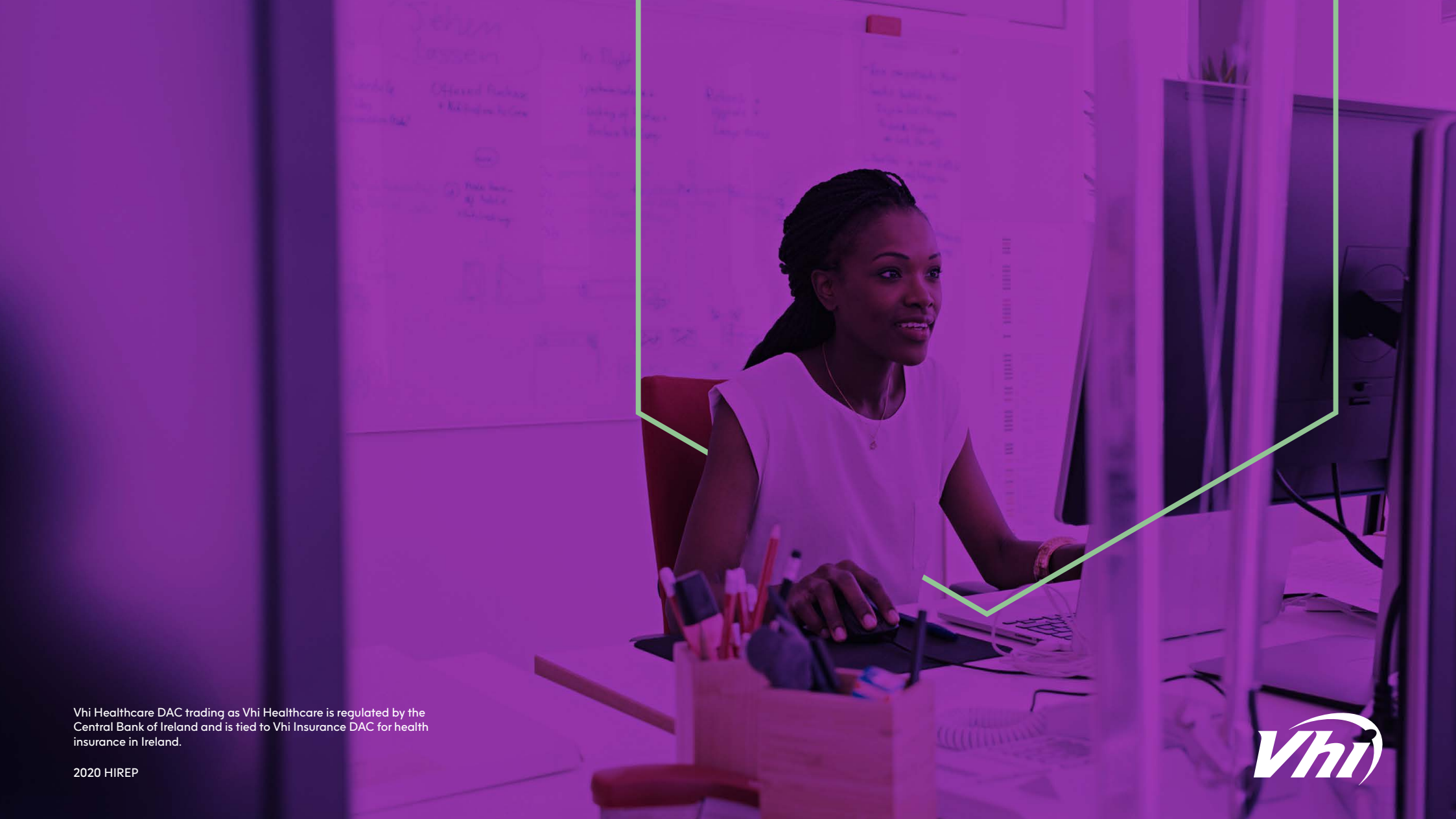**Richard Layte**, Professor of Sociology, Trinity College, Dublin.

Dr Marie Polley, Director, Marie Polley Consultancy Ltd & Co-Chair The Social Prescribing Network.

Tomás Sercovich, CEO, Business in the Community Ireland.

Dr Lisa Van Der Werff, Associate Professor in Organisational Psychology, DCU.

Dr Mark Ward, The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA), Trinity College, Dublin.

Dr Fred Zijlstra, Professor of Work & Organisational Psychology, Maastricht University.