



mHub
THE MENTAL HEALTH HUB

State of Mental Health at Work

Report 2023: East Africa

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Introduction

According to a recent Gallup article, the next global health crisis is a mental health pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) predicts that, by 2030, mental health will be the biggest crisis that we are facing on the planet. For the past decade – long before COVID-19 but significantly further accelerated as a result –, anger, stress, worry, and sadness have been on the rise around the world. 20% of adults globally report a mental illness every year. And the number of unreported cases is expected to be much higher. Gallup estimates that 7 in 10 people are struggling or suffering.

Furthermore, we are in the midst of a burnout pandemic. Chronic stress was rampant even before the COVID-19 pandemic and has now worsened further. Challenges posed by stress and burnout to staff wellbeing, productivity, and teamwork have escalated. The high stress levels of employees have serious consequences for their work life and stress negatively impacts work performance.

With exponential growth in awareness around global mental health challenges, promoting good mental health and wellbeing in the workplace has become the collective responsibility of every organization. Employers have a compelling interest in taking effective and sustainable action. Leave alone the life-altering impact of untreated mental illness on workers and their families, they face rising healthcare costs, reduced productivity, and employee turnover.

A growing number of studies show that comprehensive long-term approaches to employee wellbeing that especially also focus on evidence-based prevention and early interventions can not only be cost-effective but actually save employers money. Research has found that healthier and happier workplaces lead to improved employee morale, increased work performance, less tension and conflicts, increased employee engagement and team effectiveness, lower rates of employee absenteeism, reduced presenteeism (improved on-the-job focus), and higher levels of employee retention.

For our 2023 report, we surveyed 286 professional staff across East Africa to better understand their experiences, needs, and challenges related to workplace mental health and wellbeing. We also compare results with the findings of our previous 2021 survey.

State of Mental Health at Work 2021: Top 3 Insights

1. Stress levels were very high

The impact of COVID-19 on stress levels in 2021 was significant. Three out of four Rwandan employees indicated that they faced moderate, high, or extreme levels of stress. A third of respondents qualified their stress levels as high or extreme.

2021 Stress levels of Rwandan workers:

77.6% moderate/high/extreme stress

34.1% high/extreme stress

2. The impact of stress on the work life was serious

Two thirds of respondents believed that the current stress negatively impacted their work performance. The number of respondents who had missed workdays due to stress were significantly higher for employees in for-profit companies (3.2 days) and particularly so for executives (3.5 days). Overall, 43.5% of respondents had missed at least 1 day of work; 32.2% even 3 or more days. 15.9% of respondents experienced an increase in illness or health issues as a result of stress.

This percentage was particularly high for older employees aged 40-54 (24.0%) and women employees (25.3%).

2021 Absenteeism rates over the previous 12 months:

2.7 days The average number of days of work lost due to stress.

1.3 hours The average amount of hours of work lost every day due to stress.

3. Employers were expected to do more to support employee mental health and wellbeing

88.8% of respondents said that they wished their employer did more to support employee emotional and mental health. This desire was greatest in for-profit companies (93.6%). When evaluating new job offers, 95.8% of respondents said that it is important for them that their future employer offers emotional and mental health support services.

Employees in Rwanda in 2021 called upon their employers to do more:

88.8% wished their employer did more.

95.8% considered employer support as important when evaluating new job offers.

State of Mental Health at Work 2023: Top 4 Insights

1. Stress levels are even higher than in 2021

In 2021, the impact of COVID-19 on employee stress levels was significant. Despite the global health emergency being over, it is concerning to note that, in 2023, more than 80% of East African employees indicate experiencing moderate, high, or extreme levels of stress. This finding is particularly alarming, given that 37.8% of the respondents qualify their stress levels as high or extreme.

The highest levels of stress are experienced by junior professionals (86.3%), even more so than what executives experience (82.4%). And the percentage of women experiencing high stress is 83.2%, compared to 76.7% for men.

Respondents whose employers offer some form of employee wellbeing services suffer less stress (76.0%) than those whose employers are not offering any support (85.0%).

Many respondents face increased personal financial stress (42.0%) and it is the new entrants to the job market (18-24 years) who experience this the worst (68.4%).

More than a quarter of the employed youth aged 18-24 further stated that they struggle with mental health issues. Unfortunately, they also believe that their stress causes bad relationships with their co-workers.

Every third of respondents pointed out that heavy workloads and long working hours, as well as fear of losing their jobs are key factors contributing to increased levels of stress. And 29.4% of the respondents acknowledged that personal family situations are also an aggravating stress factor.

Employees in the NGO sector reported the highest levels of stress (85.3%), followed by employees from the IT and Manufacturing sectors (84.6% each).

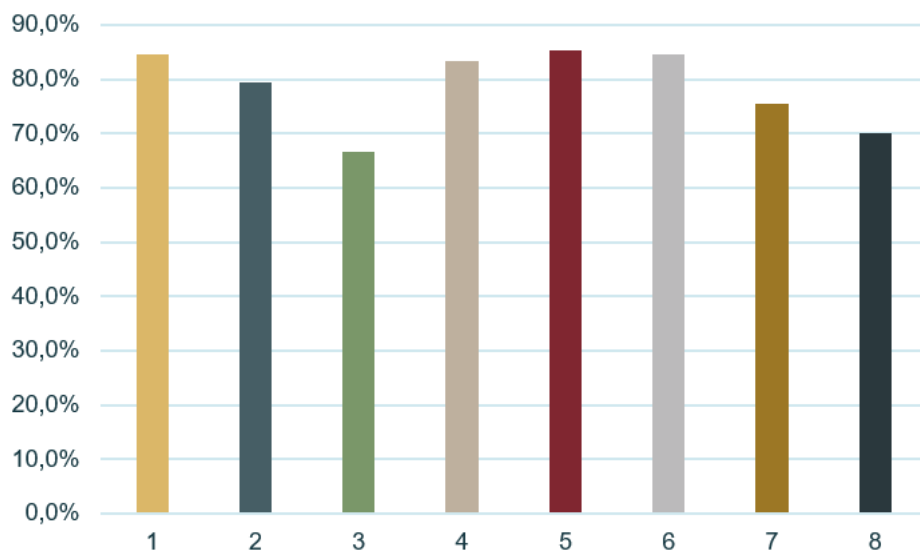
2023 Stress levels of East African workers:

80.4% moderate/high/extreme stress

37.8% high/extreme stress

Reported stress levels for employees per economic sector:

- 1. IT
84.6%
- 2. Government/public sector
79.3%
- 3. Hospitality and tourism
66.7%
- 4. Education
83.3%
- 5. NGO or non-profit
85.3%
- 6. Manufacturing
84.6%
- 7. Banking and finance
75.5%
- 8. Telecommunications
70%



2. The impact of stress on the work life has severe consequences on productivity

The high stress levels of employees have serious consequences for employers. A staggering 51.6% of respondents believe that their current stress negatively impacts their ability to *concentrate and keep focus*; and 48.3% of them believe it results in them being *less productive* (presenteeism).

These high levels are seen across all age categories and job levels alike and are similar for men and women too. The job level category of middle management recorded the highest figures for concentration, focus, and reduced productivity – an alarming 61.9% of them!

69.2% of manufacturing sector staff believe their stress results in reduced productivity. And 70% of telecommunications sector staff believe their stress causes them focus and concentration challenges.

Compared with the results in 2021, the number of respondents experiencing and increase in physical health issues as a result of stress has doubled (30.4% in 2023 compared with 15.9% in 2021).

27.6% of respondents further reported having difficulty making decisions, whereas 25.5% of respondents find it harder to collaborate with co-workers. This is even higher for senior managers (34.2%). This has severe implications for East African employers who would do well to

empower their workers to better manage their stress.

Absenteeism is also of concern to employers. Overall, 25.9% of respondents have missed 2-5 days of work over the last 6 months. On average, the respondents have missed about 1.86 days over the past 6 months due to stress. (The findings in 2021 was 2.7 days over a 12-month period, hence we see an increase of around 1 day in 2023 in average days lost).

We recorded the highest absence rates due to stress among young professionals, in the 18-24-year age group. 42.1% say they have missed 2-5 days over the last 6 months, and a further 10.5% missed 6-10 days.

Staff whose employers offer some form of wellbeing support reported less absence (21.0%) than staff whose organizations don't offer support (31.0%).

Absenteeism and presenteeism over the past 6 months:

- 1.86 days** The average number of days of work lost due to stress.
- 48.3%** less productive
- 51.6%** difficulty concentrating

3. Employers are expected to do more to support employee mental health and wellbeing

A particularly inspiring finding from our 2023 survey was that 46.9% of respondents felt that their workplace is more accepting of emotional and mental health issues now than a year ago. This is truly encouraging!

Also, it is noteworthy that there has been a significant increase in employers offering some form of emotional and mental health support to their staff. In 2021 only about a third of respondents received support; in 2023, more than 50% of respondents said they receive some form of support services from their employers.

What is important to note is that “some form of support” does not necessarily mean effective and sustainable support. In fact, a staggering 82.5% of respondents say they wish their employer did more to support employee emotional and mental health.

This desire is greatest for young professionals in the 18-24 age group

(89.5%). Across the age groups though, the request for more support is equal for both men and women (more than 80% of them).

HR leaders should take particular note of the following finding: When evaluating new job offers, 84.6% of respondents say that it is important for them that their future employer offers emotional and mental health support services. In fact, 64.3% find it ‘critically important’.

East African employees call upon their employers to do more:

82.5% wish their employer did more.

84.6% consider employer support as important when evaluating new job offers.

4. Working professionals shared signs of imminent burnout

We asked East African staff what challenges they experienced at work during the past 30 days. *Fatigue, tiredness, and lack of energy* were by far the biggest challenges of all (67.8% of respondents).

Fatigue is the most prevalent among young professionals in the 18-24 age category (78.9%). And 75.9% of women experience fatigue, tiredness, and lack of energy – compared with 56.7% of men.

This significant finding should not be taken lightly. One in five employees globally struggle to manage stress levels at work – a leading cause of burnout. Burnout is a psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job. A key dimension of this response is an overwhelming exhaustion.

Another key dimension of burnout is feelings of detachment from the job. This sheds further light on the large number of respondents who say they *lack motivation* (53.8%). The results show that lack of motivation is equally prevalent among men (52.5%) and women (54.8%).

Lack of motivation is a particular high concern among young professionals aged 18-24 years (84.2%). Many young professionals further find themselves battling with *negative thoughts and thinking patterns* (57.9%).

Within the different economic sectors, the vast majority (92.3%) of staff from the manufacturing sector struggle with *fatigue and tiredness*, and also with *lack of motivation* (84.6%).

Last but not the least, 34.6% of all respondents have *difficulty with sleeping or insomnia*.

East African employees exhibit burnout symptoms:

53.3% lack motivation.

67.8% struggle with fatigue, tiredness, and lack of energy.

Conclusion

Our 2023 survey findings paint an alarming picture: Employees across East Africa face enormous challenges around motivation, concentration, decision-making, and productivity due to the stress they experience. It is always assumed that absenteeism is a big problem for workplaces – but, in fact, *presenteeism* can be an even bigger problem. People are at work, but at reduced levels of productivity and performance.

Stress is as unavoidable in modern life as it was during the early ages – it is our survival mechanism. Stress can even be good for us – in a tough situation, stress makes you stronger. The problem is that too much stress, if we don't approach it in the right way, is bad for our mental and physical wellbeing.

While it is encouraging that more than half of respondents already receive some form of emotional and mental health support services, the data suggests that existing services are frequently insufficient. This is in line with our general belief that what is needed is the development of individual core competencies and skills to enable employees to:

- 1) effectively manage personal problems which adversely affect their health, wellbeing, and work performance; and
- 2) improve life aspects such as physical and mental health, resilience, and work-life balance.

We were happy to note that there is also cause for optimism.

Respondents were eager to share their ideas around what is needed to better support them. This is a highly encouraging situation that tells HR leaders that their investments in employee wellbeing will fall on increasingly fertile ground and that employees are ready to embrace focused activities such as stress management, self-care principles, resilience building, counseling, and therapy.

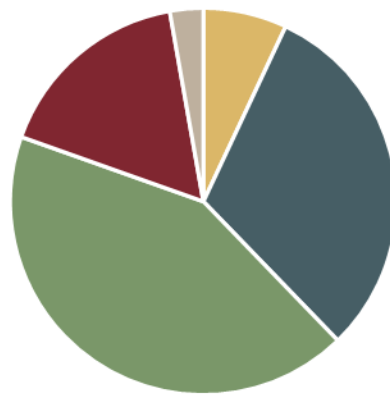
HR leaders have increasingly important incentives to create and sustain more mentally healthy environments. This requires them to become proactive and to respond with relevant and impactful interventions to prevent unmanaged workplace stress from resulting in burnout.

Key Dimensions

1. Stress

How would you characterize the overall level of stress you have experienced within the past 6 months?

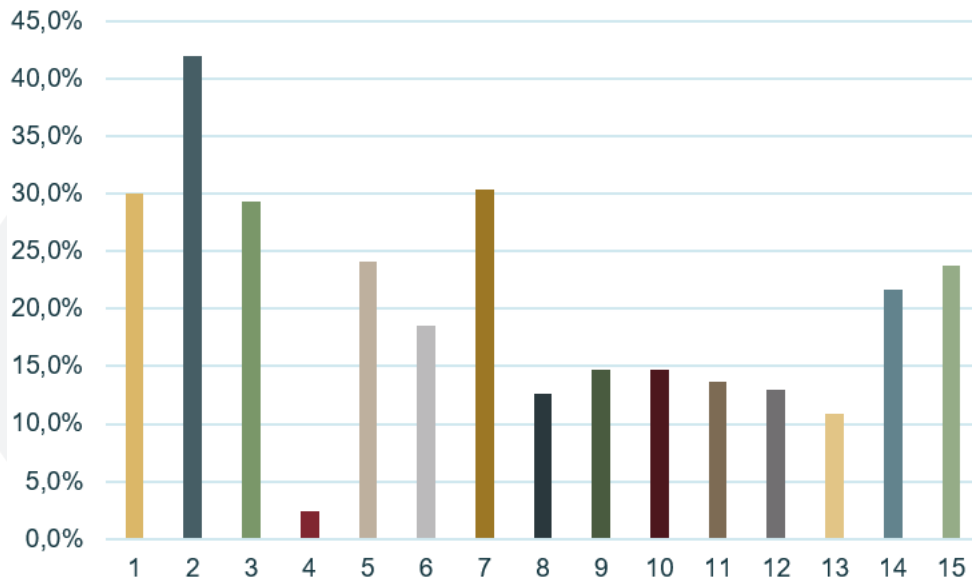
- Extreme (every day)
7%
- High (most days)
30,8%
- Moderate (at least once a day)
42,7%
- Low (rarely)
16,8%
- No stress
2,8%



What are the top issues currently impacting your stress levels at work? Multiple answers are possible.

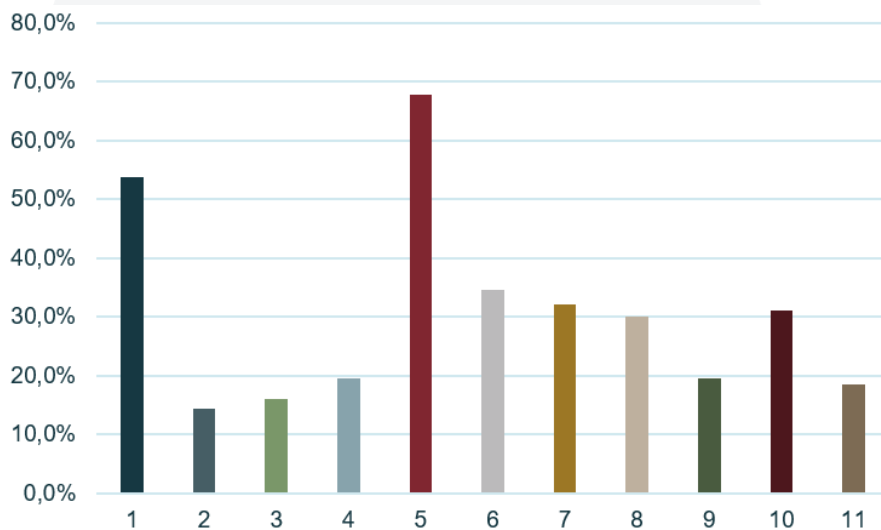
1. Fear of losing job or not being promoted
30.1%
2. Personal finances
42%
3. Personal family responsibilities
29.4%
4. Working in shifts
2.4%
5. Poor management / leadership
24.1%
6. Unclear expectations of my work, or having no say in the decision-making process
18.5%
7. Heavy workload and long hours
30.4%
8. Personal physical health concerns
12.6%
9. Personal mental health concerns
14.7%
10. Changes in duties or responsibilities
14.7%
11. Working far away from my family
13.6%
12. Changes in the organization
12.9%
13. Facing harassment, discrimination, hate or abuse
10.8%
14. Workplace relationships or conflicts
21.7%
15. Multitasking several projects with upcoming deadlines
23.8%

Top issues currently impacting stress levels at work:



Over the last 30 days, did you experience any of the following? Multiple responses are possible.

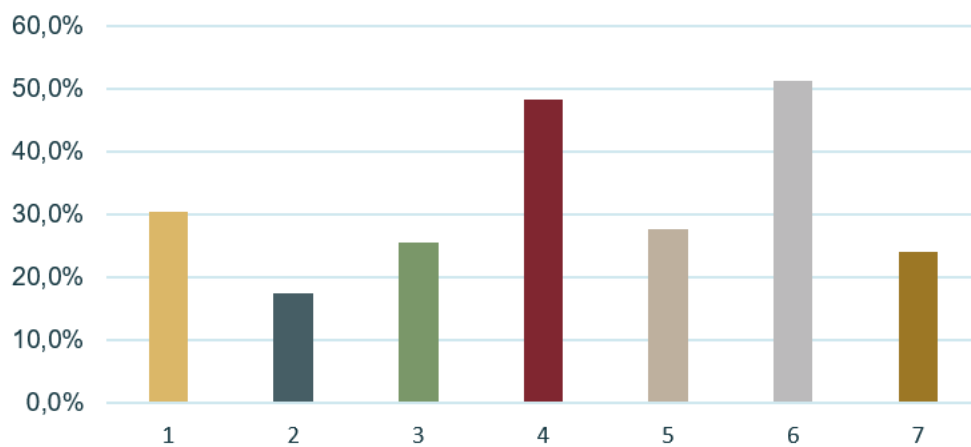
- 1. Lack of motivation **53.8%**
- 2. Lack of resilience **14.3%**
- 3. Bad interactions with others **16.1%**
- 4. Inability/ difficulty making decisions **19.6%**
- 5. **Fatigue, tiredness, lack of energy** **67.8%**
- 6. Difficulty sleeping/ insomnia **34.6%**
- 7. Negative thoughts/ thinking patterns **32.2%**
- 8. Regular backaches / headaches **30.1%**
- 9. Regular / continued sadness **19.6%**
- 10. Nervous, anxious, agitated **31.1%**
- 11. Other **18.5%**



The Impact of Stress on the Work Life

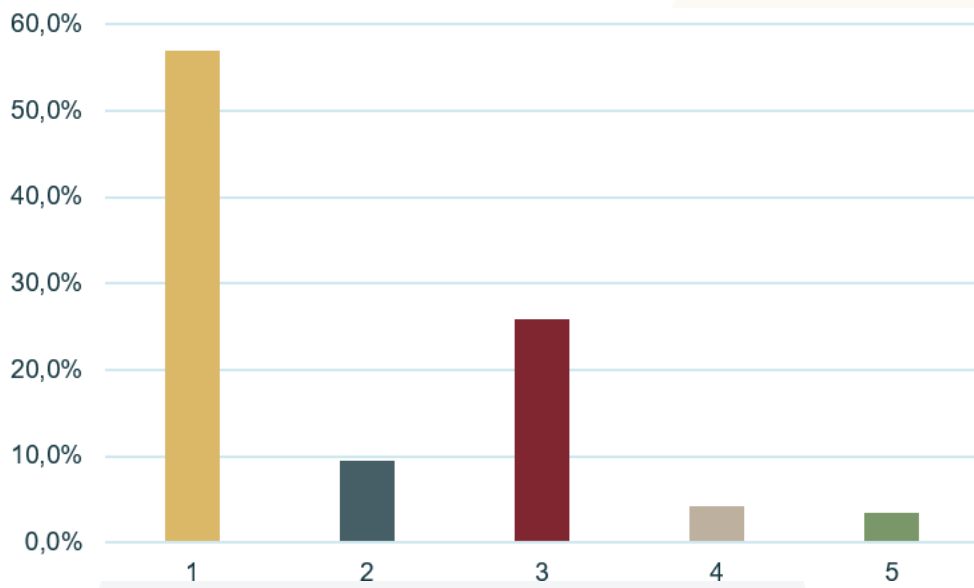
How does stress impact your work life? Multiple answers are possible.

- 1. I experience an increase in physical health issues. **30.4%**
- 2. I experience an increase in mental health issues. **17.5%**
- 3. I find it harder to collaborate with co-workers. **25.5%**
- 4. I am less productive. **48.3%**
- 5. I have difficulty with decision-making. **27.6%**
- 6. I have difficulty concentrating or keeping focus. **51.4%**
- 7. My stress does not impact my work. **24%**



How many days of work have you missed over the last 6 months due to stress, anxiety, or any other emotional or mental health challenge?

- None
57%
- 1 day
9.4%
- 2-5 days**
25.9%
- 6-10 days
4.2%
- 11+ days
3.5%



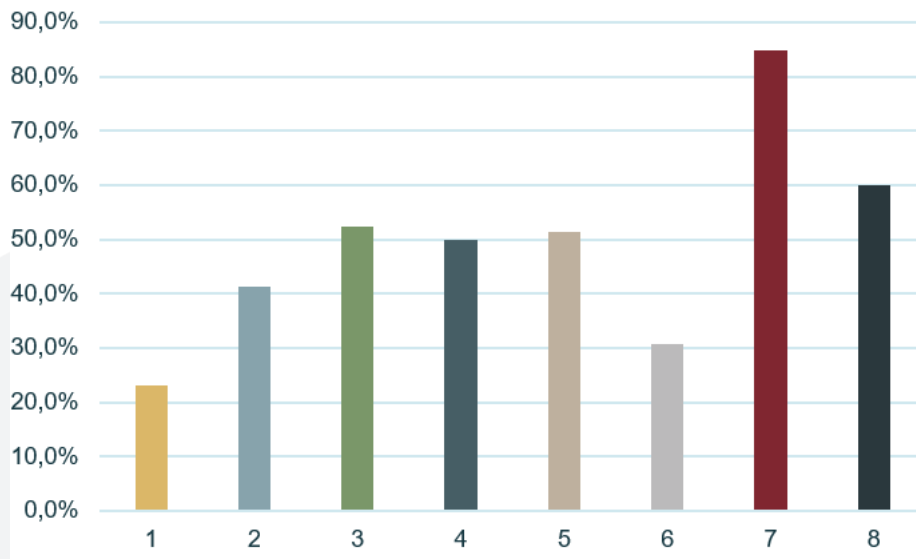
Employer Engagement in Mental Health and Wellbeing

Does your employer offer any emotional and mental health support services?



Does your employer offer any emotional and mental health support services?

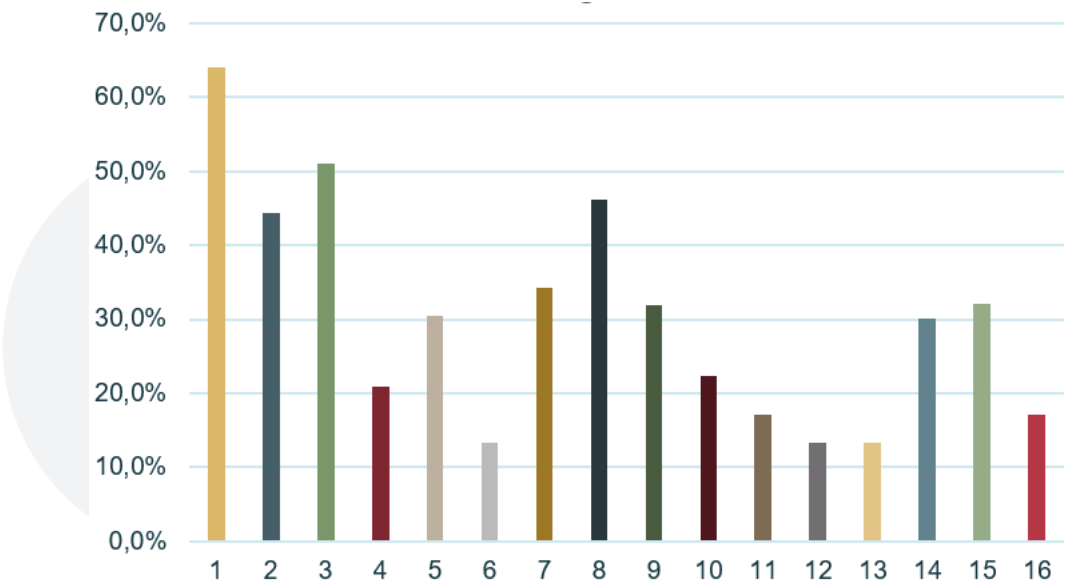




**Which wellbeing topics and services are currently a high priority for you?
Multiple answers are possible.**

- 1. **Work-life balance**
64%
- 2. **Building mental and emotional resilience**
44.4%
- 3. **Stress and anxiety management**
51%
- 4. Coping with depression
21%
- 5. **Coping with burnout**
30.4%
- 6. Coping with Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
13.3%
- 7. **Mental wellbeing for families**
34.3%
- 8. **Self-care practices and principles**
46.2%
- 9. **Individual counseling and therapy**
31.8%
- 10. Outdoor wellbeing retreat
22.4%
- 11. First Aid for employee Mental Health
17.1%
- 12. Trauma coach training
13.3%
- 13. Online self-care resources
13.3%
- 14. **Practicing self-compassion**
30.1%
- 15. **Stress release practices**
32.2%
- 16. Other
17.1%

Priority wellbeing topics and services for employees:

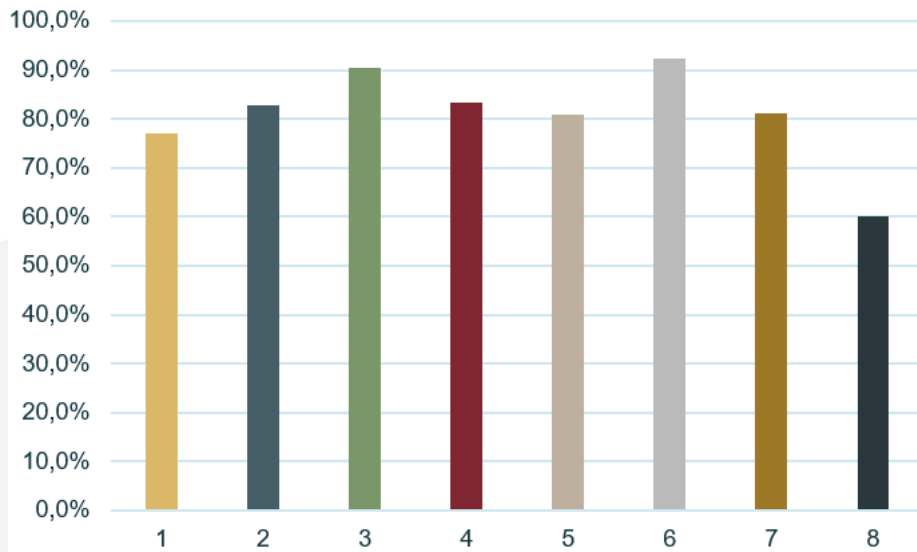


Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree somewhat	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I wish my employer did more to support employee emotional and mental health.	1%	3.5%	12.9%	32.2%	50.3%
My workplace is more accepting of emotional and mental health issues now than a year ago.	5.9%	12.6%	34.6%	32.2%	14.7%

I wish my employer did more to support employee mental health.

- 1. IT staff
76.9%
- 2. Government/ public sector staff
82.8%
- 3. Hospitality & tourism staff
90.5%
- 4. Education staff
83.3%
- 5. NGO staff
80.9%
- 6. Manufacturing staff
92.3%
- 7. Banking and finance staff
81.1%
- 8. Telecommunications staff
60%



When evaluating new job offers, how important is it for you that your future employer offers emotional and mental health support services?

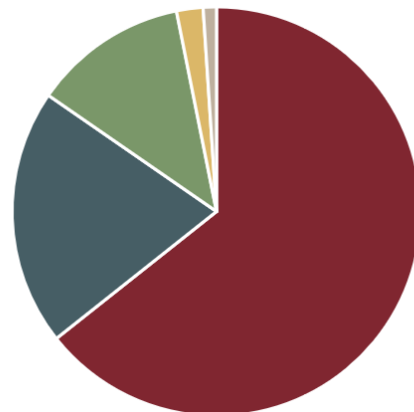
Critically important
64.3%

Very important
20.3%

Neutral
12.2%

Somewhat important
2.1%

Not important
1%



Methodology & Demographics

Methodology

We conducted this survey on the State of Mental Health at Work in East Africa with the goal of better understanding employees' views and experiences related to mental health and wellbeing at the workplace; and to compare the findings with our 2021 survey.

286 professional staff across East Africa participated in an online survey between August 10 and September 10, 2023. All respondents were at least 18 years of age and in professional employment. They represented a decent cross-section of the East African workforce in terms of age, gender, education level, job level, industry, and employer size.

The respondents participated voluntarily and did not receive any monetary or other compensation for completing the survey. To promote our study, we mainly used social media, WhatsApp groups and relevant mailing lists.

Demographics

- **Age:**
18-24 (7%), 25-34 (40%), 35-44 (40%), 45-54 (12%), 55+ (2%)
- **Gender:**
Female (58%), male (42%)
- **Education level:**
High school (3%), Advanced Diploma (9%), Bachelor's (57%), Master's or higher (29%)
- **Job level:**
Executive (6%), senior manager (13%), middle management (22%), senior professional (37%), junior professional (18%)
- **Industry:**
Banking and Finance (19%), Education (10%), Government (10%), Hospitality and Tourism (7%), IT (5%), Manufacturing (5%), NGO (24%), Telecom (3%), Other (17%)
- **Employer size:**
1-50 (41%), 51-100 (19%), 101-350 (13%), 351-500 (13%), 500+ (15%)
- **Prior experience with mental health services:**
Never (34%), at least once (19%), occasionally (28%), regularly (19%)
- **Living environment:**
Kigali (53%), other urban area in Rwanda (5%), rural area in Rwanda (12%), Nairobi (21%), other urban area in Kenya (5%), rural area in Kenya (2%), Other (2%)

About mHub

mHub is a **global mental health organization** that helps people achieve mental and emotional wellbeing. We are a social purpose business that strives to bridge the gaps in access and quality of mental health services worldwide, with a particular focus on low- and middle-income countries in Africa.

Our **vision** is to contribute to sustainable development by improving the mental health of all.

Our **mission** is to reduce the burden of mental health disorders through bridging gaps in promotion, prevention, and care, by:

- Destigmatizing mental illnesses;
- Empowering people to take good self-care and cultivate resilience;
- Supporting people through curative and non-curative wellbeing interventions;
- Influencing national health policies by advancing mental health research and advocacy; and
- Becoming the first-choice organizational wellness services provider in Africa.

mHub offers a **full spectrum of tailored and custom awareness, promotion and prevention services**, based on global best practices, and grounded in science, to reduce emotional distress, improve communication and teamwork, and enhance the skills and competencies needed to promote mental wellbeing. These competencies and skills empower your staff to 1) effectively manage personal problems which adversely affect their health, wellbeing, and work performance; and 2) improve life aspects such as physical and mental health, resilience, and work-life balance.

Core competencies and skills we focus on in our employee wellbeing program interventions and activities include, inter alia: *Effective communication and teamwork; First Aid for Mental Health at work; Mental and emotional resilience; Self-awareness and self-care; Stress and anxiety management.*

Let us help you to improve the wellbeing of your people and the resilience of your business.

mHub Clinic in Rwanda: At our Kicukiro Center in Kigali, we house an outpatient clinic, an education and training center, an area for wellness classes, and a general community space for networking events and social gatherings. We provide the country's first all-in-one Employee Wellbeing Program with a comprehensive package of proven interventions, grounded in science, and provided on a single digital platform.

For more information, contact us at: info@mhub-africa.org.



Now, more than ever, a mentally healthy workplace matters

Organizations depend on their employees to deliver their mission, vision, products, and services to drive overall success. Creating a healthy and safe workplace, one that protects both the physical and mental health of employees, is essential to achieving business objectives and shareholder returns. Clearly, investment in a mentally healthy workforce is required.

(Deloitte, 2019)