

# THE PUZZLE OF WELLBEING

Where Next for Workplace Wellbeing Post Covid-19?



A Report by 360 Workplace in partnership with WORKTECH Academy



# FOREWORD.

This report is the latest in a series looking at the relationship between workplace design and productivity. When 360 Workplace, part of the Fourfront Group, began investigating this subject in 2018 in partnership with WORKTECH Academy, we identified four key factors that contributed to company performance: leadership, environment, wellness and technology. In a survey we conducted with 120 organisations around the world, leadership was named as the most important factor and in 2019 we subsequently took a 'deep dive' into understanding how design could support different leadership styles and company cultures.

In 2020, our focus is on wellbeing. Our original survey highlighted the emerging impact of wellness on productivity: although companies generally struggled to define it and were less prepared in terms of introducing a workplace wellbeing strategy, this was an issue that attracted many committed and passionate advocates inside the organisation. We predicted that its momentum, already considerable, would only grow. This has proved to be the case. Indeed, workplace wellbeing has taken on a whole new meaning in 2020 as the public health crisis of Covid-19 has convulsed the world of work, sending millions of workers to work from home and opening a debate about the future purpose of office environments and the responsibilities of employers for the welfare of their people.

It seemed like the time was right to focus on the puzzle of workplace wellbeing as part of our ongoing series on design and productivity. How might the subject be clearly defined and explained to a company board? What are its essential components? What trends were taking shape before the pandemic and what is happening now? And how can the future of wellbeing influence company performance? To help us answer these questions, we assembled an expert panel drawn from a range of disciplines including neuroscience, positive psychology, ergonomics, employee engagement, mindfulness and academic research for the built environment.

Wellbeing at work remains a puzzle but we hope that you will find this report useful in exploring its parameters. We hope too that the essential role of workplace design will be part of the mix in developing new strategies as we begin to build again for a bright post-Covid-19 future in which both individuals and companies can flourish.

**Guenaelle Watson,**  
**Managing Director, 360 Workplace**





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# 1. DEFINITIONS OF WELLBEING.

The concept of wellbeing in the workplace is dynamic and multi-faceted, which makes it hard for many organisations to grasp. In our 2018 review of factors influencing company productivity, The Puzzle of Productivity, less than half of the firms surveyed had put in place a defined strategy for wellbeing, even though there was widespread enthusiasm for future initiatives. What could be holding organisations back?

Workplace wellbeing has become a burgeoning industry worth US \$47.5 billion according to the Global Wellness Institute. Yet, under 10 per cent of the global workforce today has access to a workplace wellbeing programme. It appears that while wellness at work is seen as having evident potential, it remains ill-defined in the organisational context, especially when related to collective performance. Well building standard registration trebled during the pandemic – an encouraging sign that a people-first approach is growing in popularity, but it remains a minority approach.

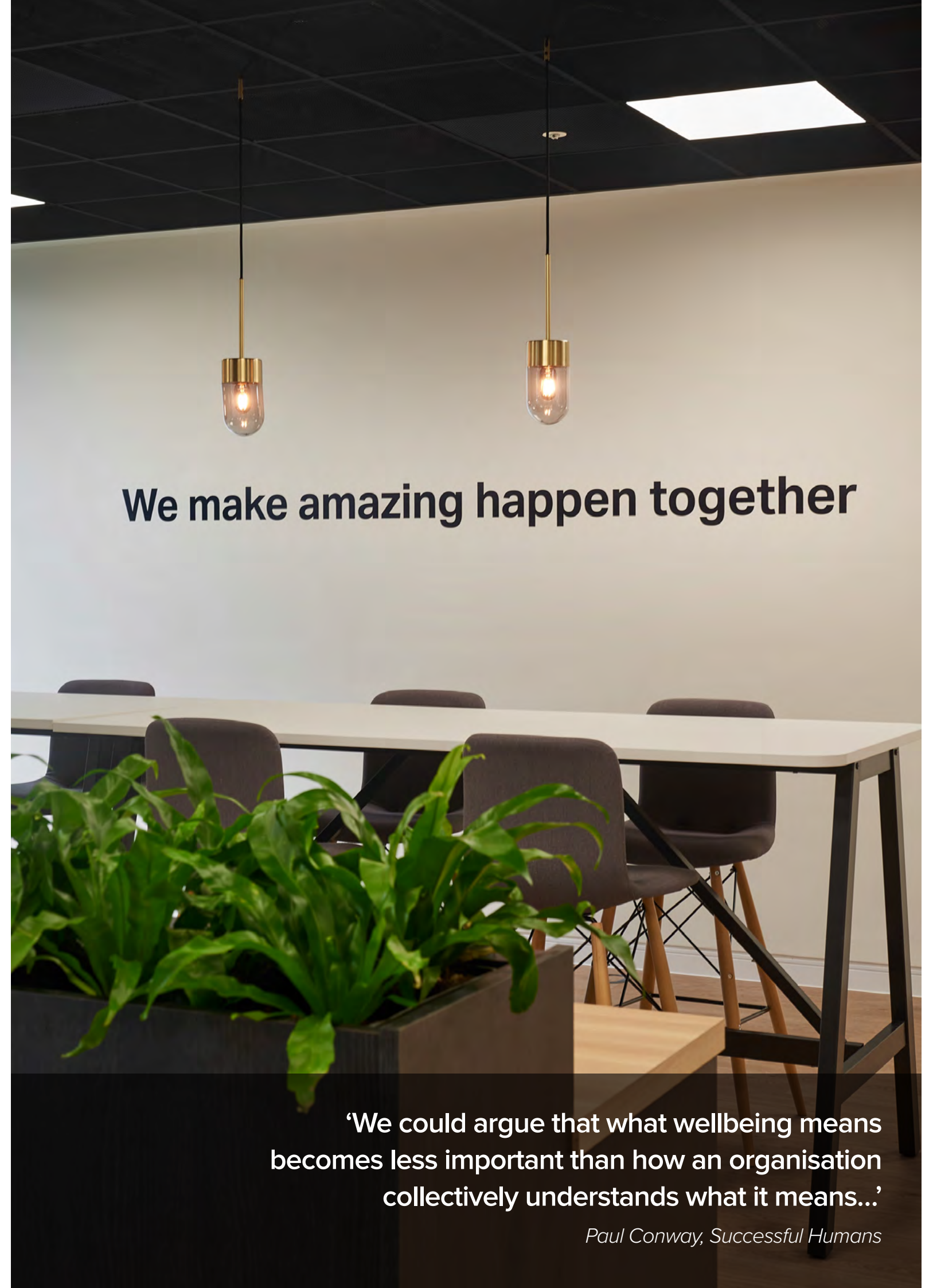
We held a workshop with members of our expert panel to explore definitions of wellbeing. Responses fell into three main categories: first, a feeling of personal joy, purpose, contentment and thriving; second physical health and third being able to manage challenges and face any problems that arise knowing that support is available. These responses broadly reflected the type of definitions evident in academic research, which tend to conform to a model of personal wellbeing as subjective and dynamic, and encompassing such things as happiness, job satisfaction, freedom from anxiety and feeling worthwhile in addition to environmental and physical factors influencing our health.

One widely accepted definition that has been useful to designers thinking about this subject is based on research by New Economics Foundation (Jeffrey et al., 2014). It describes wellbeing as the ‘equilibrium’ between a person’s own psychological, physical and social resources and external circumstances and challenges. Factors affecting wellbeing at work include: personal resources (‘who you are’) – your health, activity, and work-life balance; and organisational systems (‘where you work’) – environmental factors, social value of work, technology and infrastructure, social interactions and relationships, and sense of control.

The search for balance between what you bring as an individual and what the workplace offers in return is helpful in creating a frame for what companies should think about in terms of workplace design. Within this model, giving workers a ‘sense of control’ is especially important – it features heavily in academic research as an established driver of wellbeing at work and has wide application.

**‘Wellbeing is a fine balance between physiological, physical and mental, and it’s very personal...’**

*Alexandre Long  
Workplace Ergonomics Consultant,  
Agilea Software Solutions*



**We make amazing happen together**

**‘We could argue that what wellbeing means becomes less important than how an organisation collectively understands what it means...’**

*Paul Conway, Successful Humans*



### Sense of control

A ‘sense of control’ applies to a range of factors from control over the physical environment, commuting and travel to access to tools, resources and spaces. It encompasses control over territory and privacy, and control over relationships and interactions with others in the office community. It also extends to personalisation of workspace and employee participation into the design process itself. This sense of control is not only positive for an individual’s wellbeing, it also helps employees engage with the business. Foroudi et al (2020) found that having more personal control in the workplace has a positive effect on identification and connection with the company.

Substantial changes to our ways of working in recent years have affected our sense of control in the workplace. Knowledge working has allowed people to work more autonomously across time and space using technologies that suit them. This increased freedom and choice has given people better insights into how they work best. However, the move to flexible work in an activity-based model has also raised issues around privacy, identity and belonging – and has reduced or damaged wellbeing for certain groups.

While the impact of new work strategies on personal wellbeing has been well-documented, making the link between employee health and company performance has proved a much harder task. The academic literature suggests that simple metrics such as sickness, absenteeism or presenteeism alone are not meaningful measures as they don’t provide critical information for employers to establish directions at the organisational level.

### Components of wellbeing

When we asked our expert panel to suggest how they’d explain workplace wellbeing to a company board, they talked about such themes as enabling employees to do their best, creating a great employee experience, designing spaces for diversity and translating personal wellbeing into organisational wellbeing. Several key components of wellbeing were identified, which can be summarised as follows:

- **Purpose and meaning:** authenticity, alignment of values, a sense of purpose and achievement
- **Choice and control:** autonomy, empowering choice on where and how to work, trust and flexibility, mastery
- **Relationships and support:** a sense of belonging/ community, strong culture, having a support network and positive relationships, feeling safe, effective leadership and communication
- **Rest and respite:** clear boundaries between work and life, rest and play
- **Physical environment:** ergonomics, environment, access to daylight and biophilia, air quality, outdoor spaces, user-designed environments, noise levels, food and water provision
- **Seamless technology:** a lack of friction, tech as an enabler

Members of our expert panel emphasised the need to take a holistic approach to wellbeing across the organisation, rather than a piecemeal approach to individual elements; it was also important to understand how these components work, and why, in order to create a successful strategy that works for every employee.



In many companies there is a disconnect between how the leadership team prioritises wellbeing and how employees feel about their own needs. Without bridging this gap, creating wellbeing strategy can become a mechanistic concept that is linked only to driving performance and profitability, and is divorced from the deeper values of the organisation. But with the right leadership and a culture of communication, listening and learning, it can have a substantial impact on employee engagement.

### Culture of trust

A culture of trust is important to building relationships and support networks in the workplace. Trust is an essential dimension of wellbeing and research suggests it increases when people feel they are part of a common group (Foddy, Platow and Yamagishi, 2009.) However a recent study showed that 58 per cent of employees trust a stranger more than their boss. Workplaces can be designed to increase the likelihood that people trust each other by creating psychological safety, allowing people to experiment, innovate and share challenges and achievement. Showing vulnerability at leadership

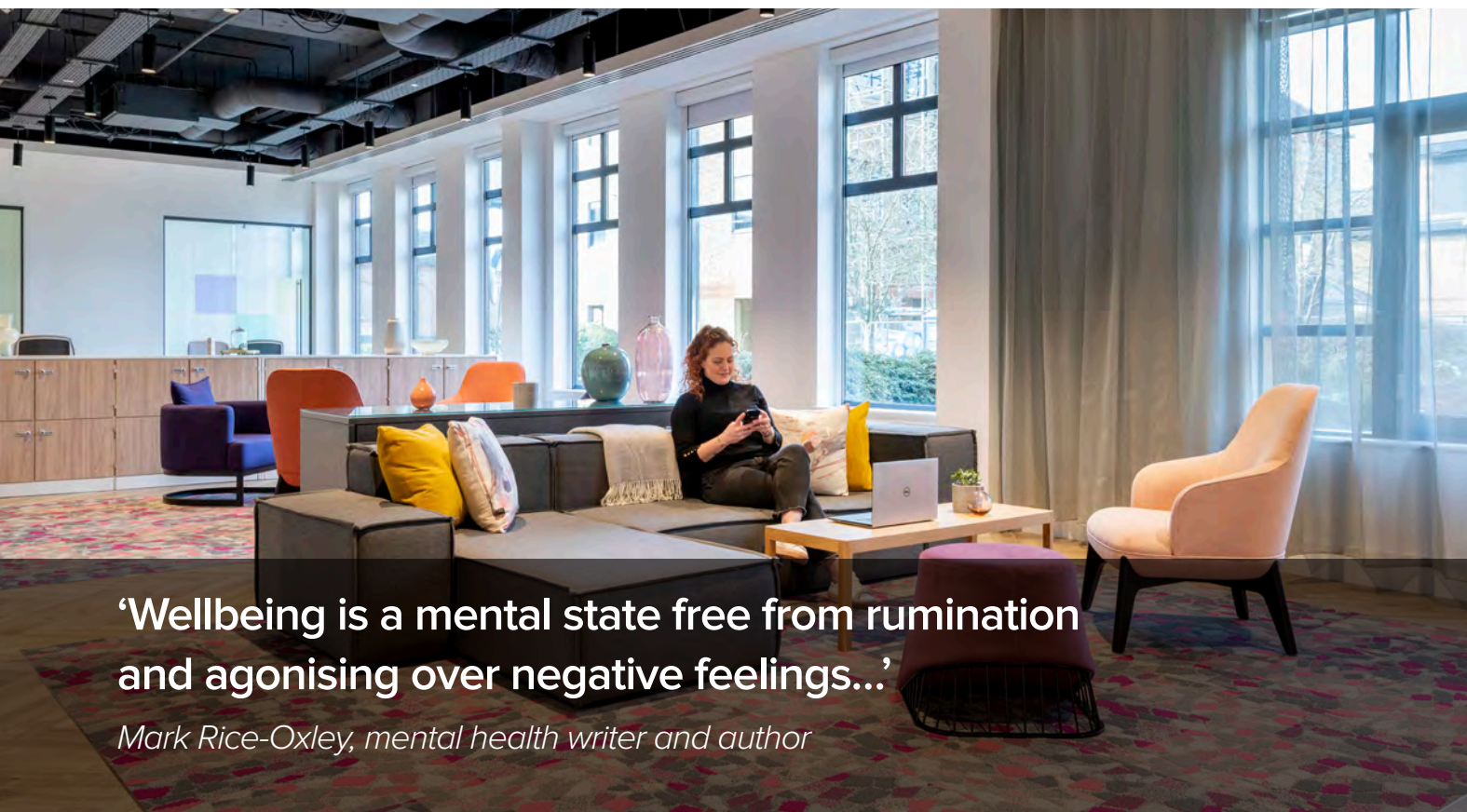
level is also important.

Since the 1980s, studies in workplace environmental psychology have consistently pinpointed the relationship between physical environment and the experience and performance of workers. This body of research has focused on the effects of ambient conditions, different types of work settings and the introduction of new elements to reflect nature such as green walls, biophilia or roof gardens on behaviour and interpersonal relations.

By 2020, we could be said to know a lot more about the connection between workplace design and the psychological processes that can lead to more positive outcomes for individual wellbeing and performance. Balance or alignment – so essential to our understanding of workplace wellbeing – is a recurrent theme in this research. But then came the great global pandemic which disrupted all sense of equilibrium in the world of work.

**‘Wellbeing is a mental state free from rumination and agonising over negative feelings...’**

*Mark Rice-Oxley, mental health writer and author*





## 2. BEFORE THE PANDEMIC.

Before Covid-19 struck so suddenly, shutting down economies around the world and sending workforces everywhere scuttling home for cover, employee wellbeing was firmly on the up. Faced with irrefutable evidence demonstrating the detrimental cost to business of poor physical and mental health, many organisations were either investing strategically in corporate wellbeing initiatives or thinking about doing so.

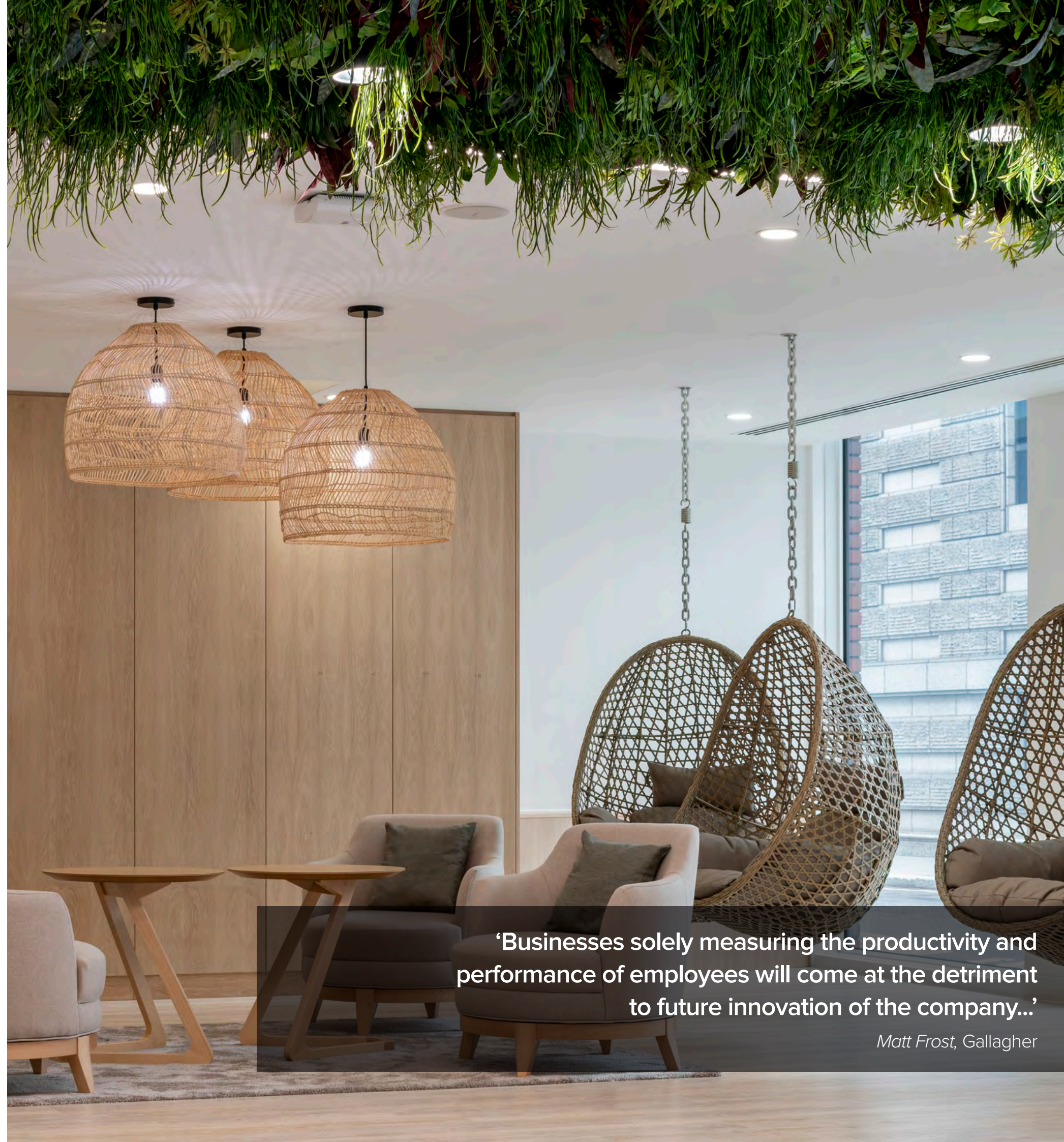
However, this welcome focus on wellbeing was mainly based on reactively addressing the negative impacts of poor wellbeing – such as presenteeism, absenteeism, burnout, stress, depression and so on – as opposed to proactively promoting a health-inducing workplace. It also prioritised elements to support the physical aspect such as 24-hour gyms, healthy food bars and other real estate amenities in the workplace rather than programmes aimed at people.

### Cost of poor mental health

According to a 2020 report by Deloitte, the cost to employers of poor mental health among employees has increased by 16 per cent since 2017, costing up to £45 billion for organisations across the UK. And the costs of mental health-related presenteeism, a condition where people come to work when they are not at their most productive, are 3.5 times the cost of mental health-related absences.

The Deloitte report says that every £1 invested in workplace interventions to improve mental health will pay back £5 in benefits. The interventions with higher returns tended to offer large-scale culture change which supports a large number of employees, with use of technology to tailor support for individuals within the organisation. Mental health goes hand in hand with productivity. Studies have found that productivity can be raised by up to 12 per cent when mental wellness is increased in the workplace.

The physical workplace assets mobilised to improve wellbeing range from biophilia and ergonomic furniture to health and fitness clubs, salad bars, nap pods and improvements in daylighting and air quality. There has been a general drive to promote better ergonomics, including sit-stand desks, also growing interest in building certifications schemes such as WELL and Fitwell.



**‘Businesses solely measuring the productivity and performance of employees will come at the detriment to future innovation of the company...’**

*Matt Frost, Gallagher*





**‘Neuroscience research indicates that spending time selecting, watering and otherwise maintaining plants in the office will, ultimately, boost employee wellbeing and performance...’**

*Sally Augustin, Research Design Connections*

### **Sense of empathy**

However, to make these innovations resonate with the workforce, they need to be accompanied by a genuine sense of empathy from the leadership. Training more community managers to provide support on wellbeing in the workplace, including mental health ‘first aiders’, is an important first step in building a more empathic culture. So is providing space and facilities for such practices as mindfulness.

We can summarise wellbeing initiatives before the pandemic as largely reactive and centred on ROI (return-on-investment) in designing physical space, with a

particular emphasis on mental health. As we navigate through Covid-19, there are some trends that will likely change path:

**Place-led approach** – A place-led approach to wellbeing led organisations to invest more in biophilia, ergonomics, activity-based working, food and fitness amenities, and sensor technologies to measure environmental conditions. While these trends are set to continue and even accelerate post Covid-19, the emphasis will change to what people want from the spaces they work in. Elements of co-design or employee participation will become a greater part of the design mix.

**Investments in trophy assets** – Large investments in such assets as high-end gyms or wellness spas will come under much more scrutiny. Instead of leaders predicting or assuming what is best for employee wellbeing, they will communicate more closely with their people to determine which amenities are most closely aligned with employee needs.

**Utilisation and density focused workspace** – Before the pandemic, organisations focused on their real estate to help control costs, squeezing more people into smaller spaces. This was often at the detriment of employee wellbeing. Now, the question is not around how many

people can fit on one floorplate, but instead how the space can be used most effectively to help employees perform, feel valued and connected. Good practice is to take a holistic view, and invest time to understand needs both from an employee’s perspective and organisational goals. Organisations can be more creative to break boundaries and provide inclusive spaces in which people feel safe and valued.



### 3. AN EMERGING PICTURE.

Workplace wellbeing in the era of the pandemic and its aftermath will have new contours. We have entered an unprecedented situation for which there is no blueprint on which to draw. The nature of the current crisis has placed more emphasis on the multi-faceted nature of wellbeing, whether it is around meeting family responsibilities, career and financial security, managing fatigue, coping with stress and anxiety, or managing fears around a safe return to the office.

The experience of Covid-19 will not be uniform across the workforce. On the one hand, working from home may have been an opportunity to exercise more autonomy, prioritise family life over commuting, and experiment with new hobbies; in this scenario, a new equilibrium asserts itself. On the other, it may also have been a time of social isolation, stress around balancing work commitments and childcare, job insecurity and worries about the health of family and friends; in this scenario, balance is hard to find.

In the early weeks of lockdown in the UK in spring 2020, the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) found that employees in the UK were already reporting a range of negative effects on overall health and wellbeing. A study by the mental health charity Mind similarly found that more than half of adults and just over two-thirds of younger people said that their mental health got worse during lockdown.

**‘The big question is how to extend wellbeing to homes as an employer – or do companies shirk responsibility?’**

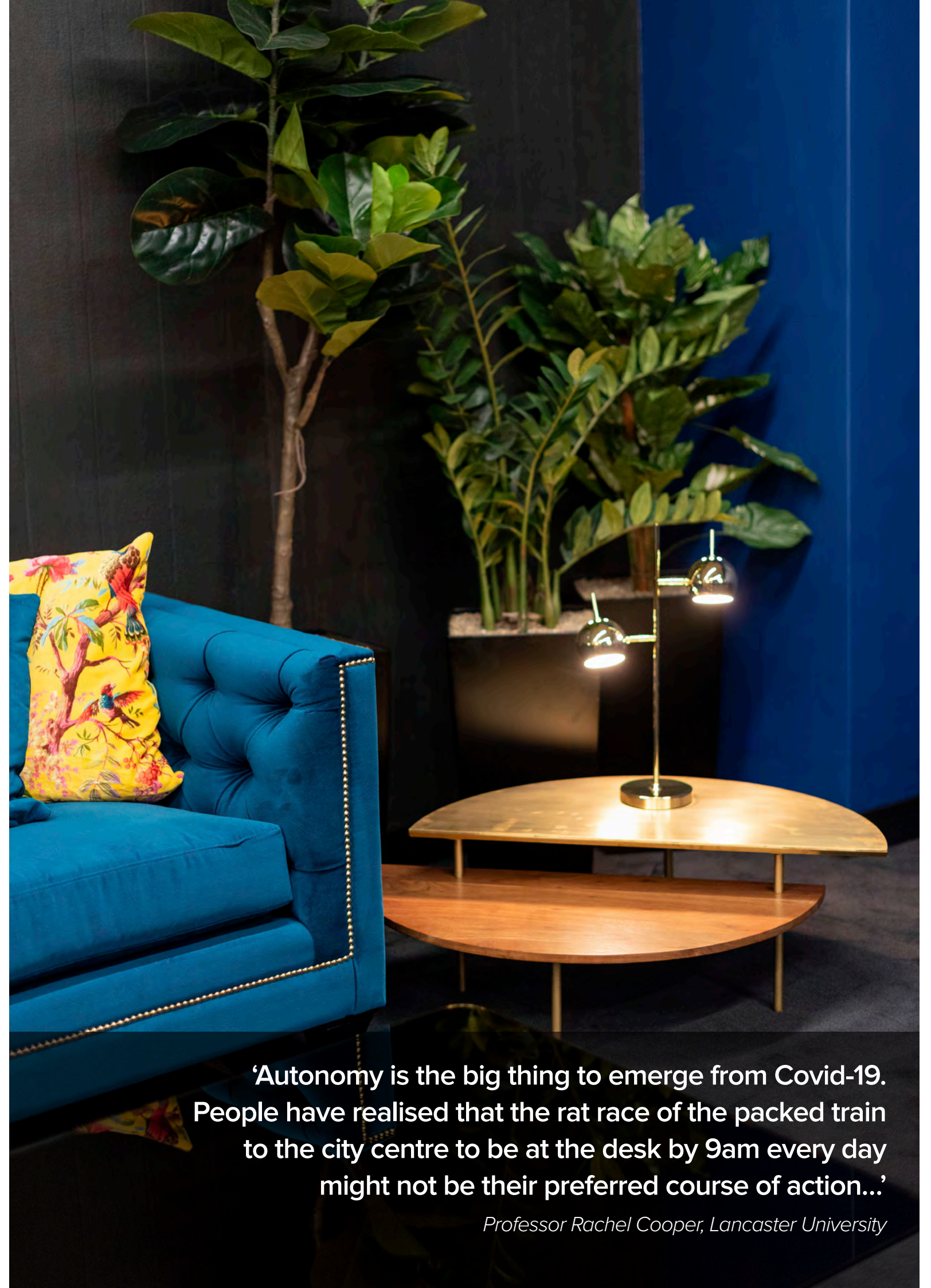
*Aidan Walker, writer and author*

THE PUZZLE OF WELLBEING

#### **Work-at-home burnout**

While video calling technology has enabled companies to implement remote working at rapid speed with little or no change management to support the shift, many people are finding that working with colleagues and clients entirely via screens is more tiring than face-to-face interactions. It also leaves people feeling constantly on call and connected, with less ability to decompress after a stressful day. Many are putting in longer hours in an attempt to demonstrate that they’re indispensable and to secure their position, risking burnout. We used to take work home; now we are living with work at home all the time.

Neuroscientists who study work and workplace told us that the wellbeing deficit being experienced in the pandemic is due to changes in the brain. People spending all day on endless video calls are suffering from deprivation of their neural networks. They are being deprived of emotional and behavioural cues, seeing colleagues only through a screen without direct eye contact; and they’re being deprived of external stimuli that are normally provided by commuting and the random encounters of office life. Without the regular level of electro-chemical ‘hits’ that the brain craves, people can ‘switch off’ and experience a dip in energy and creativity.



**‘Autonomy is the big thing to emerge from Covid-19. People have realised that the rat race of the packed train to the city centre to be at the desk by 9am every day might not be their preferred course of action...’**

*Professor Rachel Cooper, Lancaster University*



Research also suggests that a growing use of video-based supervision can also increase employee stress levels. Remote and automated monitoring can lead to the centralisation of decision-making and reduce creativity among employees on the lower rungs of the organisation. Even the basics of managing communication in virtual teams can become difficult and tiring due to the lack of shared context, role ambiguities and delayed response times in meetings.

To replicate the social encounters of the office in a virtual environment, there have been some experiments in allowing home workers to place avatars on a 2D map of the workplace to simulate social gatherings with colleagues. At lunchtime, for example, they move their avatar to a virtual kitchen to meet others. However it is too early to say how beneficial these innovations might be for group wellbeing.

**Greater autonomy**

The pandemic has produced some positives. It has given many workers more autonomy over their working life and made them re-evaluate what they really want. Performance management systems in companies are undergoing change as physical supervisory regimes are no longer feasible and remote monitoring has drawbacks; this re-evaluation will be beneficial in the long term. And, of course, the crisis represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity for business leaders to reimagine support for employee wellbeing in a way that addresses individual needs as well as company productivity.

Many organisations are on the foothills of understanding how their employees might cope with working through the

pandemic in a hybrid model of home working and more sporadic attendance at the office for face-to-face events. Researchers have claimed that the psychological impact of physical distancing is similar to the effects of significant disasters, with its trauma potentially leading to a range of mental and behavioural disorders. A more optimistic view for the future is that mental health might significantly improve when we return to the office on a more permanent basis because there will be more autonomy for employees over when, how and where they work.

Our panel of experts believes that the emerging picture of workplace wellbeing will combine the continuation of some pre Covid-19 themes with new areas of focus, including:

**Remote and hybrid working:** Wellbeing focused around remote and hybrid working models is a new area of interest, with an emphasis on giving people flexibility and choice, and supporting employees across different places of work. Performance will be driven by output rather than presence, allowing people to take control over when they work. Each individual has a different biological clock – we all have different biorhythms – understanding individual performance through identifying our chronotypes may have a huge impact on productivity.

**A new approach to real estate:** Office space as an oasis to escape the pressures of home is an emerging theme that will draw on design for user experience and service-led approaches. This trend will be combined with a retreat from the statement company HQ in favour of smaller, better provisioned hubs and a flexible working policy that



allows people to choose what might suit them best. The workplace design itself will embrace elements borrowed from our home environments. The ‘homification’ of the workplace will contribute to a sense of comfort, happiness and safety. In the future, people will demand more transparency and accessible information on how buildings’ support health and wellbeing. Applicants will not only be interviewing the employer they will be interviewing the building. Certifications such as WELL and Fitwell or AirRated will demonstrate a genuine commitment from organisations to achieve this.

In the future, people will demand more transparency and accessible information on how buildings’ support health and wellbeing. Applicants will not only be interviewing you, they will be interviewing your building. Certifications such as WELL and Fitwell or AirRated will demonstrate a genuine commitment from organisations to achieve this.

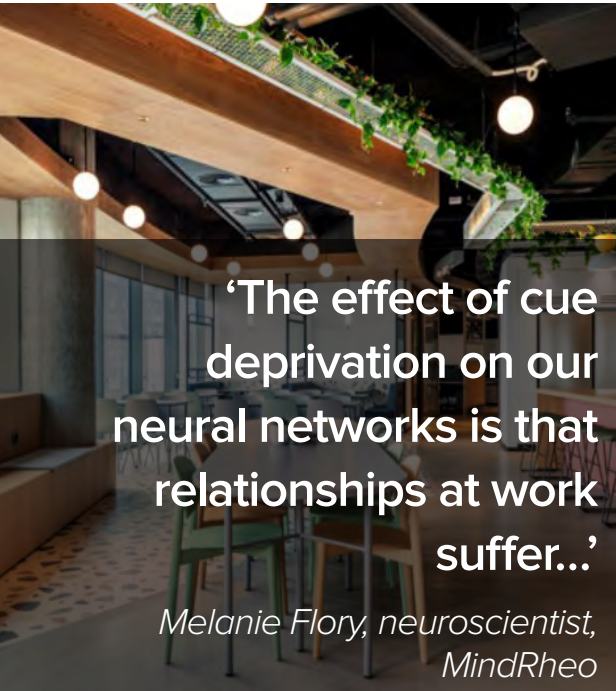
**New culture of communication and support:** A new understanding of the importance of open communication by leaders centred on empathy and compassion will go hand-in-hand with a culture of better social support across the organisation.

**Digital wellbeing:** A growth in digital wellbeing and support programmes will supplement face-to-

face and allow people to connect from wherever they are.

**Re-evaluation of values:** There will be an opportunity to align new employee wellbeing policies with a wider re-evaluation of organisational values to allow people to blend career and family obligations without feeling torn between the two.

With this picture in mind, what steps can companies take address the puzzle of wellbeing?



**‘Covid-19 has affected the solidity of the architecture of the three wellbeing elements: financial security, physical health and social connection...’**

*Mark Rice-Oxley, writer and author*





## 4. WHERE NEXT FOR WELLBEING?.

Covid-19 may have accelerated many existing trends in workplace wellbeing but it has also highlighted important aspects that were easy to ignore in the office-based order. Factors such as control, autonomy, security and safety, which have become key priorities for employees, have brought the need for new organisational wellbeing strategies into focus.

Companies have come through the first phase of pandemic by pivoting smartly to remote working and may be feeling relieved and pleased with their performance in the circumstances. But according to a new global survey from the IBM Institute for Business, which interviewed 3,450 executives in 20 countries, there is a disconnect between bosses and their employees on how well things are going. Business leaders believe they're doing well at supporting staff through changes to work disrupted by Covid-19. But employees disagree – they told IBM's researchers they are tired and overworked, feel disconnected and lack the training and support required.

### Directions for change

Here are some organisational building blocks from our expert panel for the future of wellbeing:

**Take a multi-faceted approach:** Health and wellbeing at work has become more complex and multi-faceted with psychological, emotional and spiritual as well as physical dimensions. Wellness strategy should reflect this breadth and also work across a range of locations; it should not just be centred around one signature HQ building. Giving each employee or managers a small wellbeing budget to spend as they wish could be part of a wider approach.

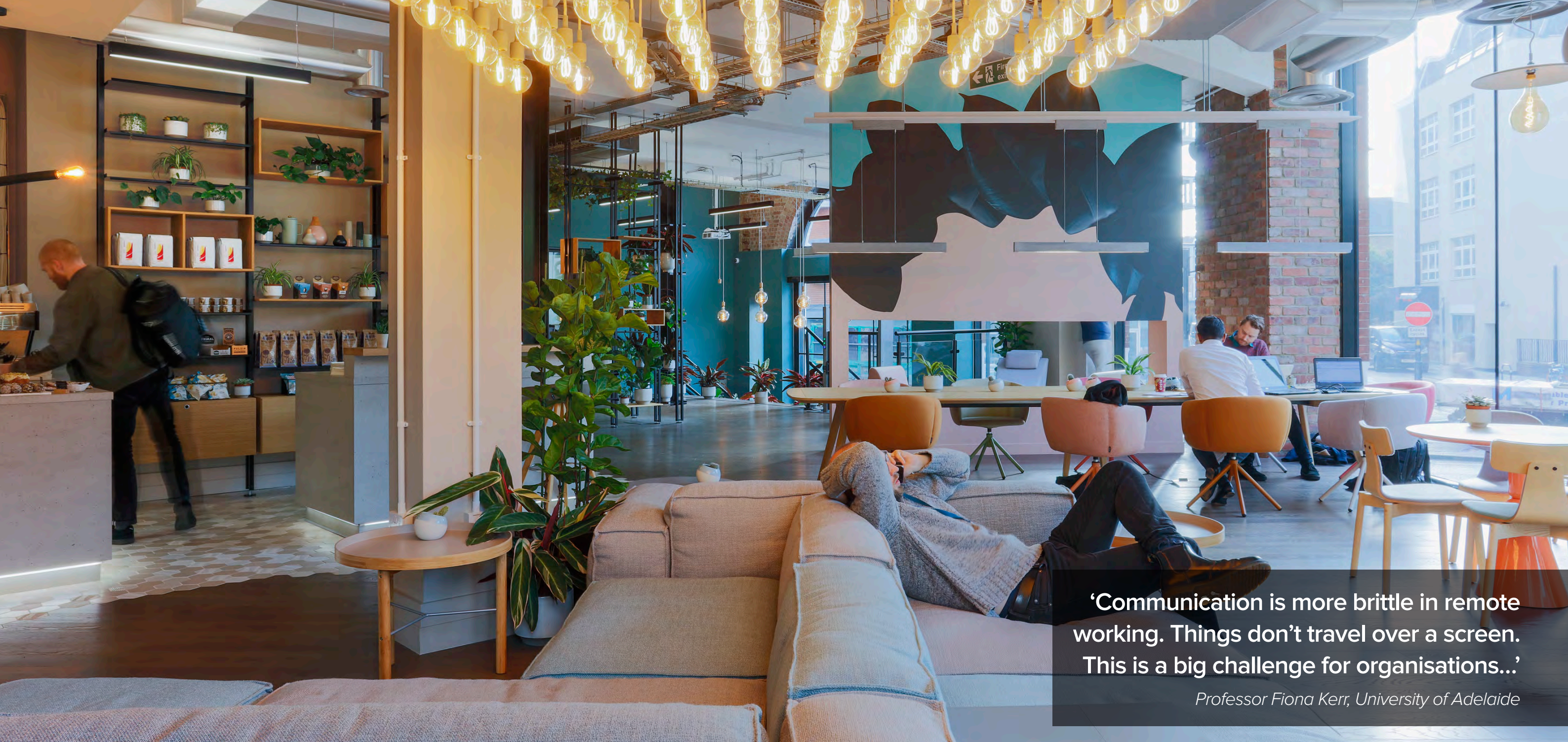
**Demonstrate empathy:** There should be a continuous, open conversation within the organisation around the framing and contextualising of wellbeing so that real employee needs at team level are being addressed – and a blanket corporate approach is avoided. A key question: how do we create psychologically comfortable workspaces, especially around a safe return to the post-virus office?



**‘The future of workplace wellbeing should center around creating cultures that encourage, embrace and celebrate people bringing their unfiltered and whole selves to work. Only then we will harness the power of individuality and bring the best out of everyone collectively.’**

*Matt Frost, Gallagher*





**‘Communication is more brittle in remote working. Things don’t travel over a screen. This is a big challenge for organisations...’**

*Professor Fiona Kerr, University of Adelaide*

**Consider co-creation:** Business leaders should show emotional intelligence and adopt a more participatory approach. Employees should not only be engaged in the co-creation and co-design of spaces to support a sense of control, choice and autonomy; there should also be user input into what wellbeing means within the company and how it might best be supported. Co-creation should be underpinned by education and training.

**Rethink office hours:** To give employees balancing a career with childcare more work-life equilibrium, don’t revert to the standard 9-to-5 model. One proposed alternative is to make core office hours comprise a buzz between 10am and 2pm with shared activities, communal branding and mission building, then the office would empty around 3pm and remote working would happen around this core.

**Prevention rather than cure:** It is important for companies to take a proactive approach to wellbeing strategy in order to be effective. Fixing things when they are already broken – offering therapy to staff, for example – is an uphill struggle. Poor wellbeing in the organisation can be hard to turn around. Investment on the front foot is the better option.

**Recognise remote work challenges:** Remote working can provide autonomy, which is good for wellbeing, but also challenge the individual. Continuous screen-based work at home can affect the brain, depriving neural networks of external stimuli. Communication between virtual team members can be difficult without a shared context. Bring at least some face-to-face meetings to the working mix.

**Promote the power of design:** Physical design interventions to improve wellbeing by providing biophilia, daylighting, better air quality, paying particular attention to acoustics through soundscaping, creating spaces to socialise and exercise are supported by a growing body of scientific evidence. Borrowing from nature is found to have a positive influence on how we feel: circular organic shapes for instance are associated with feeling safe as opposed to sharp edges which we perceive as threatening.

**Design can make your wellbeing strategy visible;** design investment and implementation should be given close attention. Introduce flexibility and modularity in the workplace by creating environment that evolve with users – the “iterative” workplace.

**Recreate the office virtually:** Companies need to harness

digital technology to give a remote workforce informal hang-outs so they can enjoy those ‘water cooler’ moments with colleagues. Social isolation leads to poor mental health. Companies need to create inclusive environments both online and offline which bring peers together for the benefit of their own wellbeing as well as the performance of the organisation.



**“For wellbeing strategies to be successful, a cohesive and coordinated approach across people, real estate, IT, facilities, communication and leadership teams is essential. Wellbeing is about people, space, technology and culture working in harmony – for it to be embedded deeply in every layer of an organisation, it has to become a priority at leadership level.**

**The corporate world has an opportunity to pave the way and lead on the wellbeing agenda. One of the positives of 2020’s pandemic is that it has been a catalyst to rethink how we live and how we work to change things for the better.”**

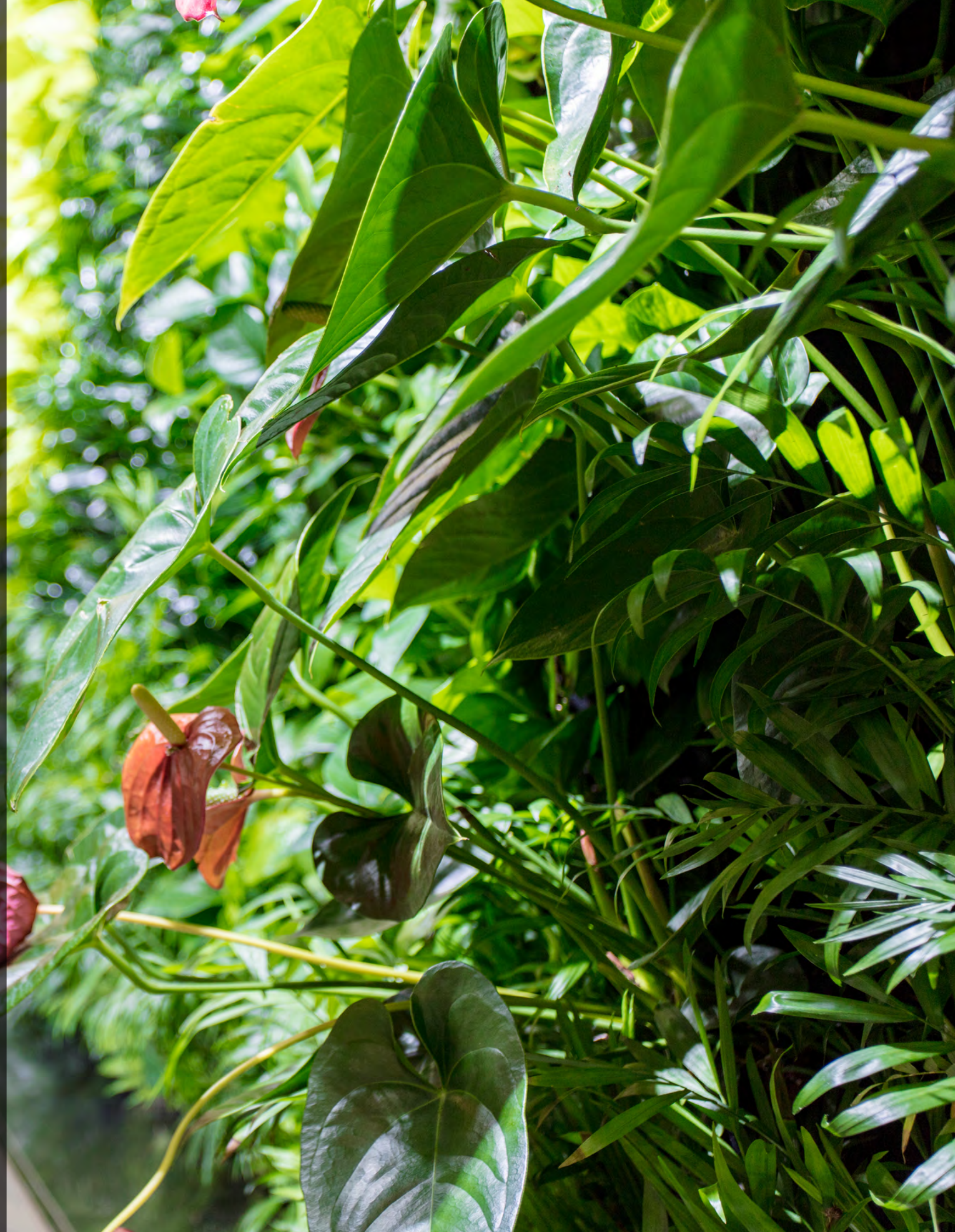
*Aki Stamatis, Co-Founder, Fourfront Group*

**Identify if your wellbeing programme is successful: how do you know if your strategies are working? First define your wellbeing performance indicators. Measure often and refine. Wellbeing can be an evolutive and iterative process.**

*Guenaelle Watson, Managing Director, 360 Workplace.*

**‘Organisations need to take responsibility when they are a factor in the disintegration of someone’s mental health...’**

*Mark Rice-Oxley, writer and author*





# EXPERT PANEL.

**Sally Augustin,**  
Director, Research Design Connections, Chicago

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**Rachel Cooper,**  
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**Melanie Flory,**  
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**Alexandre Long**  
Consultant, AP Ergonomics\*

**Mark Rice-Oxley**  
Mental health writer and author, The Guardian

**Aki Stamatis,**  
Co-Founder, Fourfront Group

**Aidan Walker,**  
Mindfulness writer and author

**Guenaelle Watson,**  
Managing Director, 360 Workplace\*

\*These members of the Expert Panel participated in a live debate on workplace wellbeing at the WORKTECH UK/EMEA 2020 conference, 28 October 2020, led by Dr Imogen Privett, Senior Research Associate, WORKTECH Academy

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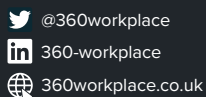




## About 360 Workplace

360 are the independent workplace consultancy arm of Fourfront Group. 360 provide insightful workplace strategies to help clients maximise their real estate portfolio and transform their existing assets to drive efficiency, cost savings and implementing programmes to improve employee engagement, performance and wellbeing.

[www.360workplace.co.uk](http://www.360workplace.co.uk)



## About WORKTECH Academy

WORKTECH Academy is the world's leading knowledge platform and membership club exploring how we'll work tomorrow. The Academy's content is curated in six streams: people, place, technology, culture, design and innovation. It brings data, ideas and insights from its extensive membership base to a global community of workplace professionals. 360 Workplace is a Global Partner of WORKTECH Academy.

[www.worktechacademy.com](http://www.worktechacademy.com)

