



The health of retail

2022

Executive summary



83%

of employees have experienced a deterioration in their mental health



54%

of managers felt unequipped to deal with their team's mental health issues



75%

of retailers said wellbeing is still high on the agenda for their CEOs

Top three factors impacting on retail colleagues' wellbeing

- Cost of living crisis** Money is the biggest worry overall, with **24%** worrying about money every day
- Abuse from customers** **30%** said abuse of staff by customers is negatively affecting wellbeing
- Post-pandemic fallout** People are exhausted. **21%** of employees said they would rather not work in retail anymore

Next steps for retailers' core strategies in 2023

1. Put people first
 2. Provide financial education
 3. Tackle abuse
 4. Improve management support
 5. Rethink the world of work
- 

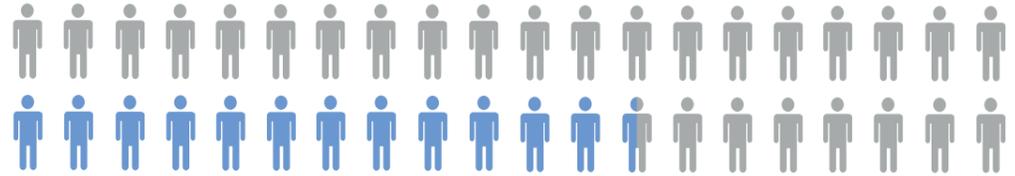
84%

of managers would value more training to help support their team's wellbeing



For **43%** of employees, the decrease in their wellbeing over the last 12 months went beyond being manageable – an increase from the **35%** who reported this last year.

Nearly a third (**31%**) of staff in large retailers want to leave retail as a career.



40%

of retailers don't have a wellbeing strategy

Pre-Covid, retail was one of the unhappiest industries to work in and despite its increase in happiness by 4% in 2022, it's still one of the lowest ranking sectors – WorkL data.

A good wellbeing strategy needs to:

1. Constantly evolve and adapt
2. Acknowledge the maturity curve
3. Remember that mindset is the biggest step
4. Have training at its heart
5. Measure success



40%

of managers said they are not well supported by their own managers and by head office



66%

of colleagues weren't able to get all the help they needed for mental health issues. 11% more than last year



195%

increase in visits to the Retail Trust's financial health digital support in 2022 so far



A quarter (25%) of UK retail employees now worry about money every day, according to our State of Financial Wellbeing research published in March 2022. In the aftermath of the pandemic, this is not surprising – but the worst may be yet to come as we head into the cost of living crisis and experience the worst drop in living standards since the 1950s.

The good news is that employers can really help: the workplace is a proven pathway for improving financial wellbeing and the business impact is undeniable. Money is essential to life and the more we can do to empower retail employees across the UK to make the most of their money, the more they will thrive and the more the sector will benefit from increased productivity, reduced attrition, better shift uptake and more.

We are excited to once again partner with the Retail Trust to help UK retailers embed financial wellbeing in their organisations in a way that truly makes a difference. Wagestream is the only financial wellbeing platform founded by charities, designed for frontline workers and built around pay and we continue on our mission to empower millions of frontline employees to achieve better long-term financial wellbeing. **Peter Briffett, CEO, Wagestream**



I've worked in retail for over 40 years, as the former Managing Director of Waitrose and Deputy Chairman of the John Lewis Partnership and Minister of State for Trade, and this report into employee wellbeing in the industry is more vital than ever.

WorkL For Business, the organisation I founded in 2017, measures, tracks and improves employee experience with our Instant Action Software™ that instantly analyses large complex data sets to pinpoint development areas, which we then provide tailored action plans and resources for each employee. We also have the world's largest live employee experience database, with data on over 24,000 organisations globally. I'm pleased to announce that we are working with the Retail Trust to provide them and their customers with benchmarking data on wellbeing.

Compared to other industries, wellbeing in the retail industry continues to perform poorly, yet the scores have steadily improved since pre-pandemic. Specifically, those aged between 25-44 in retail are now happier at work than they were pre-Covid. The pandemic might well have been the catalyst for retailers to take a good look at how they care for the wellbeing of their employees and foster a supportive working culture, but I encourage all retailers to place an even greater focus on measuring and tracking how different groups feel and take decisive action. With this report revealing that a quarter of retail employees worry about money every day and the cost of living looking like it will get worse before it gets better, workers in retail are in need of some TLC from their employers.

Lord Mark Price, founder, WorkL



The mental, physical and financial challenges our retail colleagues face today could never have been foreseen by the founding members of the Retail Trust 190 years ago. But the guiding principles laid down almost two centuries ago to create a coalition to promote and protect the health and happiness of those in our trade is arguably a more powerful guiding light now than ever.

Our people find themselves moving from one period of turmoil to another. Our data tells us they are exhausted after two years of a global pandemic. They are facing a world dominated by a brutal war that's playing out in the media in real-time, while also coming to terms with a cost of living crisis that threatens to put our standards of living

back decades.

In all this, it's essential we recognise how far the industry has come – and how committed it remains to improving workplace wellbeing.

There is a passionate commitment to the principle that for an industry to thrive, retail must foster a happy, healthy workforce. Yet the data in this report makes for difficult reading. And fires a warning shot that the journey has only just begun.

A worrying 83% of employees have experienced a deterioration in their mental health and too few line managers feel they are equipped to deal with the inevitable impact. The result on staff retention and attraction poses one of the most serious long-term challenges for this industry in recent history.

The narrative from the sector, however, is encouraging. More businesses than ever have joined with the Retail Trust in the last year to create a collective answer to the issues posed. There is a willingness to work together to measure, train and present a unified vision of an industry that truly lives its billing as 'people-first'. And an understanding that 'hope, health and happiness' should be strategic pillars to a thriving retailer in 2022.

Chris Brook-Carter, CEO, Retail Trust

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Methodology

The survey

The Retail Trust's employee survey was developed to identify how retail staff and managers have coped in the last year, with a focus on their mental health. Demographic and other segmentation questions were included to allow us to understand whether certain groups were struggling more than others.

A link to the survey was sent by email to 37,572 people who have had previous contact with the Retail Trust as well as being promoted on the Trust's website. The email encouraged people to forward the survey on to their colleagues. 1,766 people responded to the survey. Of these, 1,549 worked in retail or associated sectors. The survey was incentivised with an optional prize draw for a £100 shopping voucher.

The WorkL happiness score

The WorkL happiness survey is designed to give a 'happiness score' of up to 100, based on a series of questions. 4,500 retail workers are surveyed. WorkL asks participants to regularly rate 26 statements and feelings, ranging from, "I feel happy at work" to overall job satisfaction.

Retailer interviews

In March and April 2022, we conducted in-depth interviews with human resource directors (HRDs) and chief people officers (CPOs) at 20 UK retailers. The retailers we spoke to included brands in fashion, grocery, DIY, homewares and speciality retail.

How happy are people in retail?

**A no-holds-barred
snapshot into exactly
how your colleagues
are feeling – plus
how people leaders
are responding with
valuable insight
into the complex
world of wellbeing**

Wellbeing in the world of retail in 2022

How have global and local challenges impacted our colleagues' wellbeing?

Retail is not an easy place to be in 2022. Over the past 12 months or so, everyone in retail, across every type of business has faced the pressure of constantly changing pandemic-related restrictions, the continued fear of catching the virus, and the juggle of caring for family members who do. And if that wasn't enough, retailers have had to contend with supply chain issues, skills shortages, and (perhaps the most significant challenge for those concerned about employees' mental health), rising inflation and the cost of living.

Dealing with under-resourced teams, mental health problems that managers couldn't handle, and the aggression of stressed customers, retail staff have had another hard year.

However, these challenges have also had a profound and positive effect on employers' approaches to colleague wellbeing, with many retailers experiencing a considerable

cultural shift towards putting people's wellbeing at the core of their businesses. While people and HR leaders have been pushing for this for years, they've been joined by CEOs and other leaders across the business in recognising its vital importance.

As a result, employees are starting to benefit from a better understanding of mental health among employers and, more broadly, the crucial role of colleague wellbeing in the creation of a healthy business. While the challenges employees face are significant, so too is the increased awareness of and respect for their wellbeing. The effects of that over the past year have been visible in retailers' treatment of their staff, and are likely to have long-term consequences in the way employees and employers approach work-life balance, health and wellness.

'The upside of these challenges is that there has been a profound and positive effect on employers' approach to employee wellbeing. Many retailers are experiencing a considerable cultural shift towards putting people's wellbeing at the core of their businesses.'



Is this growing awareness of mental health issues having an impact?

While leaders are optimistic that the wellbeing of employees has improved over the last 12 months, with nearly half (45%) saying it has improved and almost a third (30%) saying it has stayed the same, colleagues would disagree. In conflict to their leaders' belief, over eight in ten employees said they had experienced a deterioration in their mental health over the last 12 months. For 43% it went beyond manageable - an increase from the 35% who reported this last year.

These figures are in sharp contrast with each other. In part this could be because of the work employers have done in the wellbeing space. That increasing awareness of mental health has helped employees

acknowledge issues, but the disparity is so significant that it is clear there is a fundamental difference in how employers think employees are feeling compared to how they are actually feeling.

"The statistics speak for themselves, there's a meaningful gap between perception and reality and it highlights the importance for independent data collection of how employees are really feeling," says Chris Brook-Carter, CEO of the Retail Trust. "There can be a lack of trust when people within an organisation are asked by their HR teams to disclose how they're feeling. But if asked by an independent partner they often feel more comfortable giving an honest answer."

The hardest hit

Which demographics are struggling the most?

- Respondents aged 16-29 reported the highest levels of anxiety, long lasting sadness, withdrawing from others, changes in eating and sleeping, and loneliness.
- Employees and managers in large businesses (those employing 50,000+) were more likely to report poor wellbeing on a number of questions. Most notable is the fact they are more likely to report a deterioration in their mental health that they did not find manageable - 42% reported this, against 33% across all businesses. In addition, those in large businesses are far more likely to want to leave retail, 31% said this against 19% in smaller businesses.
- Managers in distribution, warehousing and logistics reported the highest level of increases in mental health issues among their team. 43% of managers have seen a large growth in mental health issues, compared to 30% of managers in all other business areas who reported an increase.



21%

of employees said they would rather not work in retail anymore, rising to over a quarter (26%) for managers. A further 9% are looking for a better job in retail.

85%

of managers reported an increase in mental health issues among their team, compared to 91% last year. Of those, over a third (36%) reported a large increase, up from 28% last year.

54%

of managers reported one or more of their team having experienced a mental health issue that the manager didn't feel equipped to deal with.

90%

of women who had experienced reduced mental wellbeing reported increased anxiety, worry or fear and 66% long lasting sadness or irritability.

66%

of colleagues weren't able to get all the help they needed for mental health issues, 11% more than last year.

Support is needed at every level

As the pressure continues to fall on line managers, a clear gap in wellbeing strategy has emerged.

Managers appear to be unhappier than others – over a quarter (26%) say they want to leave retail.

Much of the pressure of the last two years has fallen on managers' shoulders. They are required to keep their teams' mental health afloat while receiving little support themselves.

As one store manager at a homewares retailer says, "Someone once said to me that being a manager and a mum is lonely, and I totally agree. It's a position where you feel like you've always got to be motivated, bright, happy and smiling, and it's really hard. I'm busy looking after my team, but it feels like no one's there in the same way for me."

In our survey, over half (54%) of the managers questioned reported that over the last 12 months, one or more of their team experienced a mental health issue that the manager didn't feel equipped to deal with.

When they do face these instances of mental health issues, 46% of managers can't say they have had sufficient resources or support from their company to help them manage staff during this time. This is an increase from 28% last year. Overall, nearly a third (29%) of all managers feel they need more tools to support their team's wellbeing. This is a significant increase from the 17% who said this last year.

The additional work required to support their teams means 65% of managers are having to work longer hours to keep up with their normal workload, an increase from 53% last year. Managers also don't feel they are being supported – 40% said they are not well supported by their own managers, or by head office. This is an increase of 14% on last year, when 26% said this.



40%

of managers said they are not well supported by their own managers, or by head office.

84%

of managers would value more training to help support their team's wellbeing.

Overall, 84% of managers would value more training to help support their team's wellbeing. As one interviewee in our survey says, it may not be enough to persuade them to stay. "Although I've had some support, I'm working on leaving retail soon. I'm a strong believer that your job

shouldn't feel like work, and that you should be able to enjoy it. I know our HR department is working on mental health awareness, but it needs to be broader – we should all have mental health training, the same as we have for first aid, so everyone understands the issues."

"It is clear from the data that an increasing number of managers are still struggling, a trend that emerged last year. I can't reiterate this enough, but training is absolutely key to them feeling valued, supported and better equipped to deal with the increasing demands being placed on them," says Cliff Lee, head of wellbeing, Retail Trust.

The WorkL happiness index

Workplace happiness is higher than pre-pandemic levels suggesting retail wellbeing strategy is paying off.

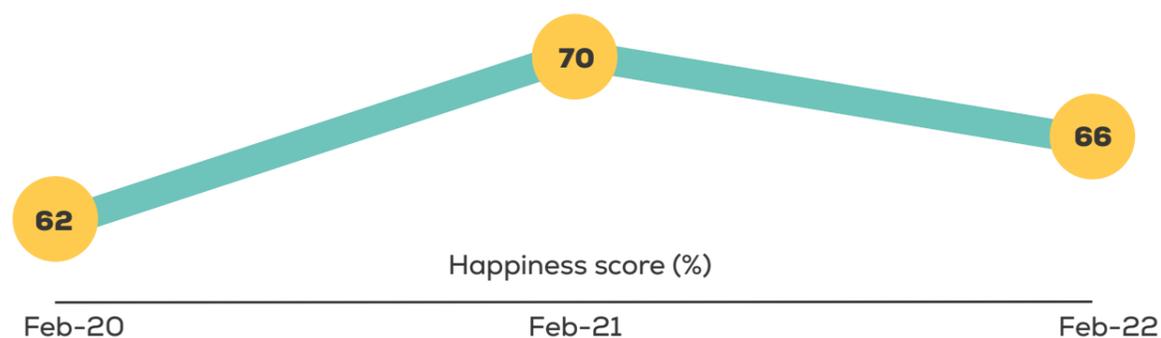
Overall, WorkL's employee happiness score among UK retail employees fell to 66% in February 2022, down from 70% in February 2021. Interestingly, this is still higher than the pre-pandemic score of 62%.

The year-on-year fall was driven by decreases in every measure of WorkL's happiness index, including wellbeing and pride in their work.

For instance, when asked if they agree or disagree with the statement "I rarely feel anxious or depressed about work", only 58% agreed, down from 61% in 2021 and 2020.

While workplace happiness is down year-on-year, most of the measures in the happiness index are still higher than they were in 2020. The efforts retailers have put into wellbeing and recognition may have paid off and the frontline nature of the work during the pandemic may also have increased the sense of satisfaction staff get from their work.

"There's no doubt that the pandemic has encouraged employers to take more time and effort in looking after their teams' wellbeing. Pre-Covid, retail was one of the unhappiest industries to work in and despite its increase in happiness by 4% in 2022, it's still one of the lowest ranking sectors. Its peak of 70% in February 2021 is most likely the result of employees being furloughed," says Lord Mark Price, founder of WorkL

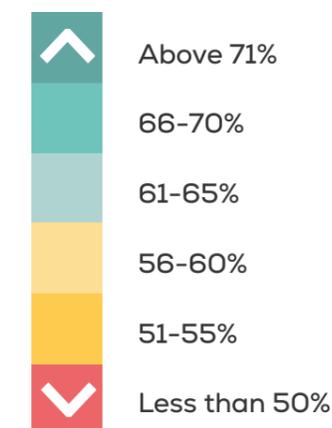


| | Feb-20 | Feb-21 | Feb-22 | |
|----|--------|--------|----------------|--|
| 63 | 71 | 65 | Male | |
| 61 | 69 | 66 | Female | |
| 63 | 75 | 70 | Management | |
| 61 | 68 | 64 | Non-management | |
| 72 | 73 | 69 | <1 year | |
| 67 | 69 | 64 | 1-5 years | |
| 58 | 73 | 66 | 5-10 years | |
| 47 | 70 | 65 | >10 years | |
| | 73 | 69 | 16-18 | |
| 73 | 68 | 65 | 19-24 | |
| 58 | 71 | 64 | 25-34 | |
| 61 | 70 | 68 | 35-44 | |
| 68 | 74 | 65 | 45-54 | |
| 54 | 70 | 68 | 55-64 | |
| 63 | 70 | 65 | White | |
| 82 | 69 | 73 | Black | |
| 51 | 70 | 69 | Asian | |
| 69 | 74 | 69 | Mixed | |
| | 71 | 66 | Heterosexual | |
| | 64 | 64 | LGBTQ+ | |
| | 58 | 56 | Disabled | |
| | 70 | 66 | Not disabled | |

Workplace happiness among different groups

Some demographic groups have lower wellbeing than others, with a range of factors combining to impact people's health and wellbeing. WorkL data shows differences across a range of groups. Particularly notable is the low level of wellbeing among disabled employees.

Lord Mark Price comments, "On average, employees with a disability rank lower in happiness compared to employees without a disability. Since 2021 we've seen this gap decrease in retail, which is good news, but we're still looking at a significant 10% difference in happiness, which is now in line with other industries. All employers must open up the conversation with their disabled employees to understand the physical and mental needs to help increase their workplace happiness."



Is the wellbeing culture shifting?

Our interviews with 20 retail HR and people leaders help to develop a complex picture of wellbeing across the sector. Most are relatively far along in their wellbeing journeys: the pandemic both catalysed existing efforts and pushed more companies into the right mindset for driving the change required. Hearteningly, 75% of the retailers we spoke to said wellbeing is still high on the agenda for their CEO and other business leaders.

For some businesses, this has led to real cultural shifts.

For other retailers, however, there is still a long way to go. Some mentioned that while business leaders do care about staff, wellbeing as a topic has slipped down the agenda slightly since the early, intense days of the pandemic. Others flagged how the return to the office has meant leaders feel calmer about the issue, they can see people who appear to be fine, and so they assume everyone feels ok.



“Wellbeing is falling down the agenda for our business leaders.”

Director of organisational development, fashion and homewares retailer.

“Wellbeing has become a much easier part of our conversations. We talk about it so much more openly - rest up, recharge, less working at the weekends. It's changed the culture of 'always on.' It's been a couple of years since these changes started to come into place - I don't know how I was doing it two years ago.”
Talent development lead, homeware retailer.

“We are about to launch our new leadership model and care is at the core of that. Wellbeing is high on the agenda, because it's a source of competitive advantage for all our colleagues but especially as Gen Z joins, people's expectation of work is changing. It was triggered by COVID-19. Businesses were exposed and able to demonstrate their true values: did people really matter?”
People director, DIY retailer.

“Wellbeing has never been as high on the agenda as I would like. Our leaders do care, and they do want to do the right thing. But there are so many other competing priorities.”
Head of HR, supermarket.

“We've not really taken the time to really understand the root causes [of low wellbeing] so we can address them. It just hasn't been factored into our thinking. Do our senior leaders really role model a good work-life balance? I don't think we do. We say the right things, but we don't necessarily do the right things. The messaging is there. But are we driving a culture of wellbeing? I don't feel we are. We're superficial. There's a lot more work to do to shift the culture.”
Head of employee experience, department store retailer.

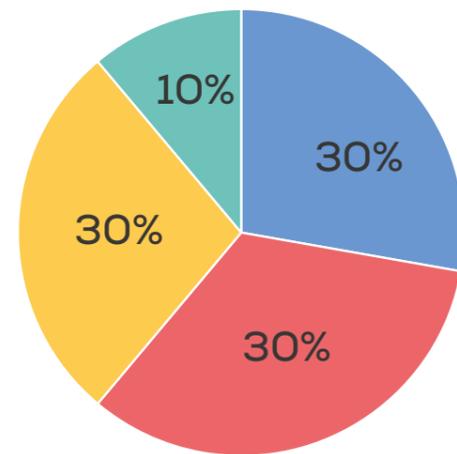
“Wellbeing has become part of our culture. It's part of our language and conversation - it's ok to be vulnerable.”
People director, fashion retailer.

Why a wellbeing strategy is key

Developing a formal wellbeing strategy is a key step for businesses who are seriously invested in improving the wellbeing of their staff. In 2022, 65% of the retailers we spoke to have a formal strategy in place that has been communicated to staff. Half of these put it in place pre-pandemic, the rest have done so since March 2020.

We asked retailers if they have a wellbeing strategy in place

- Yes, in place pre-pandemic
- Yes, within the last two years
- No but plan to
- No and don't plan to



Another quarter (25%) are in the process of putting a strategy together.

Chris Brook-Carter, CEO at the Retail Trust, says it's a good idea to take a slow and steady approach to strategy. "If you've never done it before you need to take people on the journey, or it will feel quite overwhelming. It needs to be paced right to get the traction needed, especially if the employer hasn't historically focused on wellbeing."

The people director at a fashion retailer we spoke to agreed it has been necessary to carefully build up trust. "Our biggest challenge this year has probably been building trust, so people felt they could start to have those conversations around

mental health. We didn't focus on it enough previously, and people didn't feel comfortable initially talking about it." Once a strategy is in place, the nature of wellbeing and mental health means it needs to constantly adapt and evolve. "Board sponsored, owned by HR and driven by employees - constantly review it, wellbeing is a changing beast," says Brook-Carter. "Even if your strategy was comprehensive two years ago, make sure it is still relevant today. The danger is that organisations focus on the same aspects, or talk about the same issues year in year out, such as mental health. The messaging needs to be broad and holistic, so you are engaging with as many colleagues as possible."

Wellbeing strategy: what to include

Retail Trust's Chris Brook-Carter outlines five steps to building a wellbeing strategy

- 1. Constantly evolve and adapt**
Wellbeing means different things to different people, meaning employers need to keep a permanent eye on how things are changing and new ways to help. There will be changes in focus and it's important to horizon scan. There are rarely 'new' topics in wellbeing, but organisations are becoming braver, going beyond the traditional topics and tuning into increasingly sensitive areas.
- 2. Be aware of the maturity curve**
Focus on the easier, more basic things first and then move into more difficult areas such as domestic abuse or suicide awareness. Every time you go for a new focus area you accept that the number of people it affects might be less, but the impact is phenomenal.
- 3. Remember mindset is the biggest step**
Acknowledging that employees can't simply leave their issues at the door is critical to minimising the damaging effects of presenteeism, ensuring the strategy acknowledges this whilst providing employees with access to a range of appropriate support mechanisms will have a positive impact on both employer and on the business.
- 4. Train, train, train**
Leadership training has the biggest impact on workplace wellbeing. Policies are great, but if people don't know about them or how to implement them they're just words on a page.
- 5. Measure success**
Starting with a baseline assessment is essential before you begin any interventions or programmes in order to understand if you're moving the dial.



The biggest shifts in mental health and wellbeing needs in 2022

Going forward, we have identified three main shifts retailers should be aware of:

1. The big work-life rethink
2. The intolerance epidemic
3. The cost of living crisis

In this section, we'll explore what retailers should be doing in each of these areas.

A photograph of three people from behind, standing on a rooftop or balcony at sunset. They have their arms raised in the air, and the scene is bathed in the warm, golden light of the setting sun. The person on the left is wearing a striped shirt and a backpack. The person in the middle is wearing a denim jacket. The person on the right is wearing a grey sweater and has a ring on their finger.

The big pandemic work-life rethink

And how is this affecting retail?

The future success of retail depends on retaining and attracting top talent across every area of the business, from shop floor and distribution to central services, so what part does wellbeing play in attracting and holding onto talent?

“Our biggest challenge is retention”

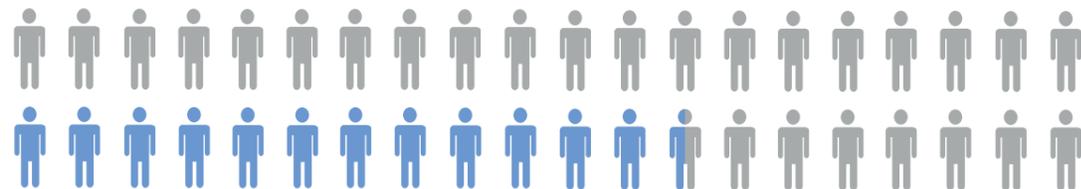
Retailers are reporting that many employees are falling out of love with retail. What has been their response to this challenge and how can wellbeing strategy play a part?

The last two years have prompted workers in every sector to rethink their lives, and retail is no exception. In fact, the frontline nature of the work has made retail particularly susceptible, and this is clearly reflected in the experiences and priorities of the people leaders we spoke to. Many are observing a significant shift in employees' priorities, as the people director at a fashion retailer says, “We are seeing people having made some big life choices as result of the pandemic.”

The data from our employee survey backs up what HR and people leaders are observing. Over a fifth (21%) of all employees would rather not work in retail anymore; another quarter are not content in their role.

Staff working in bigger companies (50,000+ employees) are particularly keen to leave – nearly a third (31%) of this group wants to leave retail as a career. →

Nearly a third (31%) of staff in large retailers want to leave retail as a career.



“Churn is high. People are re-evaluating their lives as we come out of the pandemic. For frontline colleagues – it’s not well paid, it’s hard, furlough felt unfair.”
Head of HR, supermarket.

“We’ve seen a big churn in management, and across junior roles in support office. For us there’s now a real focus for us on building back our community across all areas of business. When people leave they’re not going to other service industries. It’s more that they’re a bit tarnished by retail.”
People director, fashion and lifestyle retailer

“People have reflected a lot in terms of what they want from their jobs, and are thinking very differently. They feel it’s been a really hard slog and they are all a bit exhausted. A lot of it is re-evaluation of their lives.”
People director, speciality retailer.

“Retention and recruitment will be our biggest challenges this year. We’re starting to see more people in management roles leave stores, and not necessarily to go to other retailers. They’re making different life choices about where they want their careers to go.”
Head of group employee experience, department store retailer.

“Before the pandemic, we had really good retention, a highly engaged workforce, a good length of service. This year we’ve seen that reverse and we’re almost back where we were.”

Talent and development lead, homeware retailer.

These challenges are translating into a significant flight risk for retail employees. WorkL data from 2021 shows flight risk in retail employees is consistently higher than the global average, reaching its peak during May and September 2021 at 35%, which is 9% higher than average. The retailers we spoke to were also focused on the issue, with nearly a third (30%) flagging retention as their biggest priority in 2022. A further 30% said engagement is their biggest priority, because higher engagement leads to better retention.

Cliff Lee, head of wellbeing at the Retail Trust says turnover has always been high amongst store staff. "The difference now is we're seeing middle management and central support roles leaving." While some are moving for more money, many are leaving retail altogether in that previously mentioned pandemic-prompted life reassessment.

In response, retailers are focusing on a range of measures to keep valuable staff. Raising wages is one approach, although doing this across an entire business is not always possible. Most are involving some sort of cultural element, focusing on the sense of community people can get from work. The organisational development lead at a food service chain says: "Our biggest priority just now is to ensure we have an inclusive culture where everyone feels more than welcome. You're not only invited to the party, you're invited to dance. It's important for us because of the challenges we have with retention."

For others, it's about ensuring recognition and career development are built into the business. The people director at a fashion retailer says: "Recognising the astonishing work that line managers have done has been key and will continue to be. Getting them to a really good footing and helping them to continue building careers rather than pausing. Retention is an issue in the industry, but instead of thinking how to fix retention we think about how to develop careers."

"People have been through the wringer. It's understandable that people may use the pandemic as a springboard for a change of career."
Cliff Lee, head of wellbeing, Retail Trust



Relationship with line managers, customer experience and work-life rethink all play a part in flight risk.

"We know that wellbeing is linked to flight risk - the worse your wellbeing at work, the more chance there is that you're going to leave. Despite wellbeing scores for retail workers increasing from the beginning of the pandemic to now, when asked if they are rarely anxious or depressed at work we see an increase which is worrying. Retail workers have a very high flight risk and this could be down to employees re-thinking their work-life post-pandemic but it is more likely to be linked to their customer experience in retail as well as linked to how their managers are treating them."
Lord Mark Price, founder, WorkL

The intolerance epidemic

From in-store and deliveries to customer service phone lines, retailers are feeling the impact of an increasingly intolerant society

The customer isn't always right

Increasingly antisocial behaviour against those who have a customer-facing role has a huge impact on wellbeing and happiness levels, so what can be done about it?

The increase in abuse and violence against store staff, call centre and delivery colleagues is likely to be playing a major role in boosting the high turnover discussed in the previous chapter. Many retail workers were on the frontline during the pandemic – and as Cliff Lee, head of wellbeing at the Retail Trust says: “Violence against workers is higher than ever. The pandemic was so tough – the Great British public did not always shower themselves in glory.”

“Violence against workers is higher than ever. The pandemic was so tough – the Great British public did not always shower themselves in glory.”

A store manager at a homewares retailer agrees, saying: “Customers have become more needy, disgruntled, abrupt and rude. I used to say to my colleagues that for every customer who leaves you feeling upset, there are ten or twenty nice ones. But that ratio is changing for the worse, and how we're all feeling means we can't brush it off as easily. We're here to serve customers, but they're not always right.”

Another respondent to our survey says they'd felt ill-equipped to deal with the increase in aggression. “Our managers say they're always there if we need them, but once you've been in the firing line, it's too late, and we're not told how to deal with it. On one shift, I was on door duty, and there was a 45-minute wait to come inside. One customer refused to queue, and started shouting, swearing and filming me. I experienced a lot of that kind of behaviour over the pandemic, and it affected me more than I realised. At the time I was so tired, I just wanted to go home, eat and sleep, but there have also been days where I've sat down and cried.”

Nearly a third (30%) of the retailers we spoke to flagged store staff abuse as one of their top three issues impacting wellbeing, with the problem being particularly acute in retailers selling necessities such as groceries or everyday household items.

“We have an issue with store abuse, it's been tough in recent times,” says the chief people officer at a homewares chain. “It makes you want to cry – it's a real problem. We're going though quite an intolerant time as a society. This has impacted morale.”

The chief people officer at a grocery retailer agrees, saying: “Abuse of store staff in 2021 was dreadful.” This was due to customers taking their fear and stress relating to the pandemic out on colleagues. Supply chain issues increased the problem as well, with people failing to understand why they couldn't get hold of what they wanted. “There was a huge spike in how badly people are treating colleagues. Last year was much harder than 2020.”

The head of employee experience at a department store chain says the company has recently launched a zero-tolerance policy towards abusive customers. “There's still the perception of ‘the customer is always right’ – even if they're being horrible. If they're not displaying the right behaviour, we need to protect our colleagues. I've heard stories of colleagues being spat at, having trolleys pushed into them. It's really tough.” →

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“There's still the perception of ‘the customer is always right’ – even if they're being horrible. If they're not displaying the right behaviour, we need to protect our colleagues. I've heard stories of colleagues being spat at, having trolleys pushed into them. It's really tough.” Head of employee experience, department store chain

The atmosphere and tension created by this abuse is significantly impacting wellbeing, even for those who haven't personally experienced it.

"The problem with this aggression it is has become a social norm," says Brook-Carter "It's is a societal issue. Retailers can take steps to mitigate it, but we need as a sector to continue to put pressure on the government to address the issue. It needs to be taken seriously."

Retailers can take some steps to mitigate the problem - in store signage, for example, can help get the message across that abuse won't be tolerated. Badges for staff members can help highlight that they are here to help.

Lee suggests retailers should also carefully review their policies to determine whether they are contributing to the problem. For example, most retailers train their

staff not to put themselves at risk when confronting shoplifters, and would agree their safety is more important than stock. However, he adds: "But when I was a store manager and regional manager, I was bonused and/or potentially disciplined based on stock loss within my stores. So, guidance can be seen by colleagues as contradictory, and as a result leads people to put themselves in difficult positions because they feel they'll be held responsible for excessive stock loss.

"It's also crucial to avoid annoying customers with poor customer service policies, leaving staff to deal with the consequences. Ridiculous policies put staff at risk. Don't wind people up and create moments of tension. Organisations could easily stand in the customer's shoes, and look at customer service processes for managing returns, refunds and dealing with complaints."

Three ways to tackle abusive customers

1.

Review policies

Conduct a careful review of policies to determine whether they are contributing to the problem and avoid annoying customers with poor customer service processes.

2.

Upskill colleagues

Provide training to help staff deal with difficult and abusive customers. Plus, increase support post-conflict.

3.

Introduce in-store signage

Make it clear abuse of staff members won't be tolerated with signage throughout the store. Badges for staff members can help highlight that they are here to help.



"It's a societal issue. Retailers can take steps to mitigate it, but we need as a sector to continue to put pressure on the government to address the issue." Chris Brook-Carter, CEO, Retail Trust

The cost of living crisis

As the cost of living crisis deepens, providing colleagues with financial education, support and encouraging open conversations has never been more important

It's time to fast track financial education

Upskilling colleagues to be financially literate should be top of the agenda

Cost of living is already a problem for many of the retailers and staff we spoke to, and this is likely to intensify as 2022 progresses.

In January 2022, research from StepChange, a debt management charity, found that one in three people in the UK are now struggling to keep up with bills and credit commitments. The charity spoke to 5,000 people and found a third are struggling, which is more than double the number at the start of the pandemic.

A report by financial app Wagestream, meanwhile, surveyed 5,000 employees in November 2021 and

found that 24% worry about money every day, which is up 8% in a year - with money the biggest worry overall in 2022.

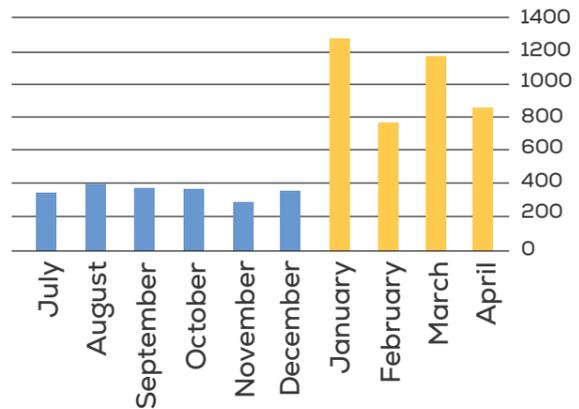
While inflation affects everyone, it is the hourly-paid staff in stores and logistics that people leaders are particularly concerned about.

Over half (55%) of the HRDs and people leaders we spoke to said that over the previous 12 months, increased cost of living was one of the top three factors impacting people's wellbeing. We expect this figure to rise in the coming 12 months. →

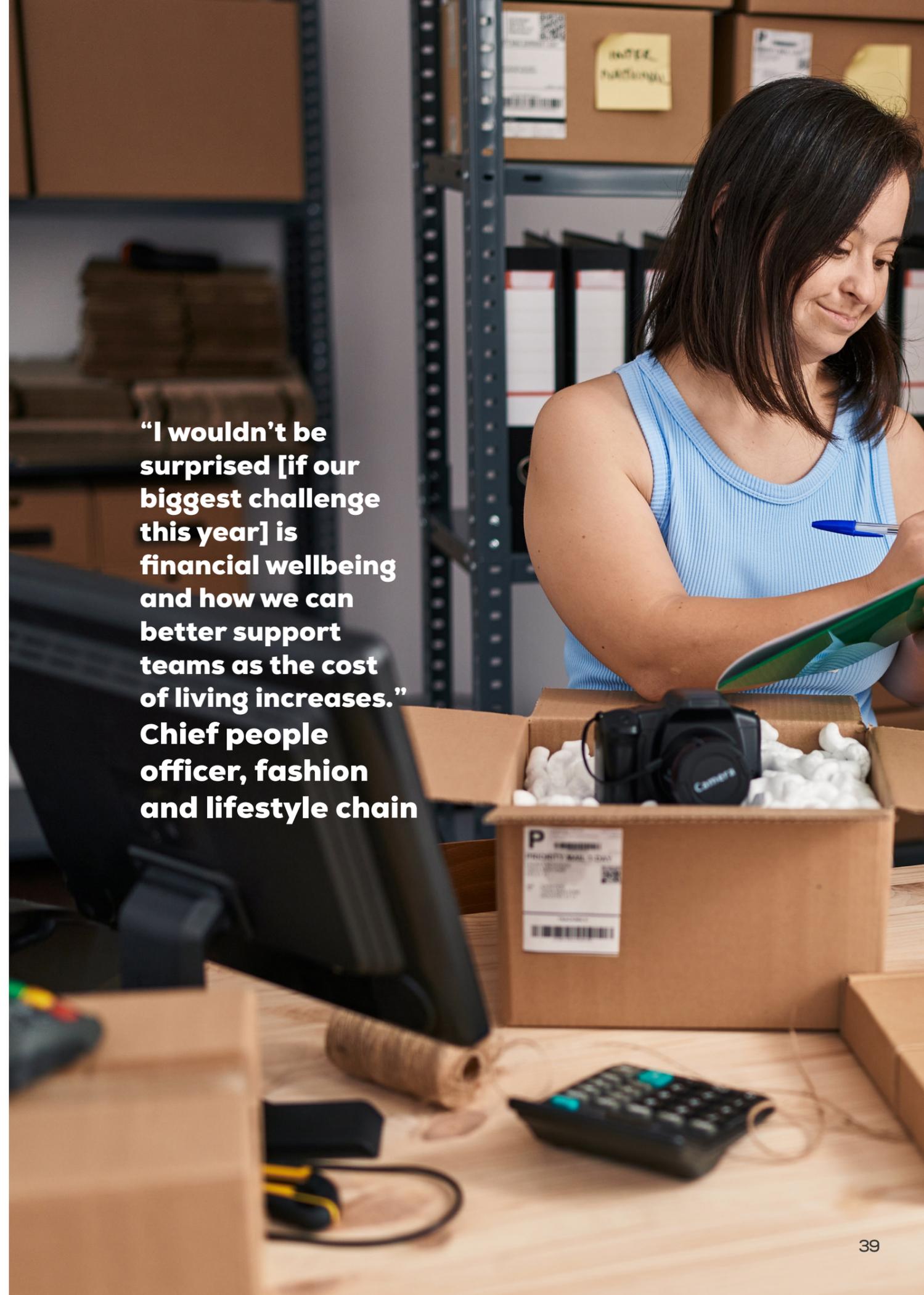
More employees are reaching out for financial support

There's been a 195% increase in visits to our financial health digital support this year, compared to the last four months of 2021, with a 28% increase in applications for financial assistance this year (over the same period).

● 2021 ● 2022



“I wouldn't be surprised [if our biggest challenge this year] is financial wellbeing and how we can better support teams as the cost of living increases.”
Chief people officer, fashion and lifestyle chain



The chief people officer at a supermarket chain says the business is concerned about knock-on mental health effects: "People are hugely worried about finances - heating, fuel costs. We are worried about the toll of that from a mental health perspective."

Another chief people officer at a fashion and lifestyle chain adds the business is concerned about how best to help its staff. "I wouldn't be surprised [if our biggest challenge this year] is financial wellbeing and how we can better support teams as the cost of living increases. We're mindful of decent pay increases but also that they'll be absorbed by National Insurance increases and the cost of living."

Several of the retailers we spoke to are using financial wellbeing apps, such as Wagestream, to enable staff to access their wages as they're earned.

Cliff Lee, head of wellbeing at the Retail Trust, says one of the best things employers can do is provide financial education. "It's not always possible to give pay rises because of other rising costs. Organisations are having to make sure they remain profitable." Ultimately, he says, this means the impact of inflation will be most felt by employees. "Financial education is something we definitely advocate. Lots of people don't have basic skills on how to budget, and use quick fixes such as credit cards. Employers need to think about how they can help people budget and encourage people to take ownership of this. Talking about this stuff is very powerful."

The need for an open, honest approach is particularly acute in retail, where employees are constantly

surrounded by new, exciting products that they can't always afford. "Frontline workers are in store selling aspirational products. You're on a low wage but surrounded by beautiful things. Some people will put themselves in financial difficulty to get the latest gadget."

Talking about these issues will help staff become more resilient and improve both mental and financial wellbeing, enabling them to do a better job.

"People are hugely worried about finances. We are worried about the toll of that from a mental health perspective."
Chief people officer, supermarket retailer



55%

of HR and people leaders said that over the previous 12 months, increased cost of living was one of the top three factors impacting people's wellbeing.

"Financial education is something we definitely advocate. Lots of people don't have basic skills on how to budget, and use quick fixes such as credit cards. Employers need to think about how they can help people budget and encourage people to take ownership of this. Talking about this stuff is very powerful." Cliff Lee, head of wellbeing, Retail Trust



Moving forward

We've identified five main steps for retailers to take in order to retain top talent, boost productivity and most importantly maintain and build employee health and wellbeing

Next steps

Embedding these five themes into wellbeing strategies should be a priority for retailers in the coming 12 months

As every retailer, HR leader, and staff member knows, it's a tricky time for retail and things are not likely to get easy any time soon.

But as our data and interviews show, wellbeing and mental health has never been as high on the agenda as it is today.

To maintain and build employee health and productivity, we recommend embedding five themes into retailers' core strategies.



1.

Put people first

It's imperative that one of the long-term positive consequences of the pandemic is the importance of employee wellbeing. Targeted investment is needed as well as a wellbeing strategy with clear outcomes that evolve in line with organisational processes.

2.

Provide financial education

It won't be easy helping colleagues through the coming months of rising costs, but every employer can provide or link to financial education resources to help employees better control their financial situation. Talking about the topic is another crucial step.

3.

Tackle abuse

Employers need to improve support for staff, train colleagues to deal with abusive behaviour and make it clear to customers that poor behaviour won't be tolerated. Use brand power to start public conversations around the subject and continue government lobbying.

4.

Improve management support

Managers are struggling. Employers should review their support policies for managers and provide crucial training to ensure colleagues who need support are appropriately signposted so the onus doesn't fall directly on their line manager.

5.

Rethink the world of work

Reversing the big resignation will require a multi-pronged strategy. Take shifting priorities into account by offering increased flexibility, the ability to change roles, career progression, reduced hours to allow for other things and greater connection to the organisation's broader purpose.

The Retail Trust impact

How we have supported our colleagues in the year to 25 April 2022

£406,131
given in financial aid.

25%
increase in digital self-help.

13,968
calls taken by our wellbeing helpline.

47%
increase in counselling support.

9,664
counselling sessions delivered to colleagues in need.

3,387
retail colleagues trained at our mental health and wellbeing courses.



WorkL FOR BUSINESS

The retail wellbeing index

We're excited to announce our new partnership with WorkL. Together we will work to improve the hope, health and happiness of employees in retail by underpinning our wellbeing services with the data powerhouse and expertise of WorkL to offer bespoke insights, predictive analytics and action plans for retailers through a Wellbeing survey.

WorkL for Business is an employee experience platform that partners with organisations to offer flexible employee engagement surveys to measure sentiment across the employee lifecycle - onboarding, appraisal, review, engagement and exit surveys all from one harmonised login page and instant interactive dashboard. We also specialise in Wellbeing and Diversity and Inclusion surveys through our unique indices and predictive analysis. We also have one of the world's largest employee engagement databases, meaning

you can benchmark how you're doing versus all of your competitors, in your sector and by a range of demographics. We currently have employee engagement data on more than 25,000 organisations across 26 sectors spanning 195 countries. Our Instant Action Software™ provides tailored actions, resources and industry-leading career development service for all employees helping your people fulfil their potential and be the best they can at work. We represent some of the most engaged workforces in the UK:



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