

Stressed: More than a quarter of Midlands firms have had employees off with mental health issues in the past 12 months

There has been a substantial rise in the proportion of Midlands businesses with staff off work due to long-term mental health issues, according to a new report.

The annual survey of 1,900 Midlands-based firms by the [Enterprise Research Centre \(ERC\)](#), which WBS academic [Stephen Roper](#) is Director of, found that while mental health absence continues to be an issue for a large number of firms, there has been a particularly striking increase in long-term absences.

Researchers found that 27.5 per cent of firms reported they had experienced some level of mental health related absence in the previous year. The proportion of those who said that at least some of this was long-term (defined as lasting four weeks or more) grew from 38 per cent in 2023 to 47.2 per cent in 2024 - a substantial increase of 9.2 per cent.

The [Workplace Mental Health in Midlands firms 2024](#) report also reveals evidence of continuing problems with 'presenteeism' (when employees work when they are unwell or work long hours). There was a dramatic increase in presenteeism in 2023, and it remains high. Well over a third of businesses reported some level of presenteeism in their workplace in the 2024 survey.

Previous analysis by ERC researchers estimated that firms experiencing workplace mental health issues could see their productivity drop by 25 per cent.

The study also found evidence of more businesses responding to these pressures by adopting measures to address mental health, with 57 per cent of firms offering initiatives in 2024, up from 52 per cent in 2023, and 44 per cent before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, nearly 80 per cent of firms believe they ought to offer such initiatives, which point to a substantial gap between intention and action.

Lead researcher [Maria Wishart](#) said:

"Our research shows that mental health issues continue to be a problem for a substantial proportion of businesses. And it isn't a problem that is just going to go away.

"The sharp rise in businesses reporting they are having long-term mental health-related sickness absence is particularly concerning, as the consequences for the individual and the business tend to be greater.

"Not only do mental health issues have negative effects on the individuals and families experiencing them, we also know they have a detrimental impact on business performance.

"While it has been encouraging to see a rise in businesses providing mental health support to their staff, there is much more to be done. A sizeable portion do not offer any mental health initiatives, and nearly a fifth told us that they have no plans to do so in the future either.

"We really need to shift the dial on workplace mental health, and this will require action on a range of fronts, from Government, mental health organisations and employers."

How to deal with mental health at work?

There were some differences by industry, with long-term mental health absence spikes in manufacturing, wholesale/retail and hospitality, which the research indicates is likely to be connected to higher proportions of lower-paid, lower-skill jobs in these sectors.

The report recommends making more education and support available to employers, as well as tailored support for smaller businesses. It also emphasises the need for businesses to put employee wellbeing at the centre of job design to create healthier working environments.

The role of industry bodies is also highlighted, particularly in those sectors where there is a higher prevalence of mental health issues and a low adoption of practices to help by bosses.

Dr Wishart said:

“There are differences between sectors that show up in our research and need more attention.

“The data indicates there could be a link between lower skilled, less secure jobs and long-term mental health absence for example.

“There are also sectors where the proportion of employers offering mental health initiatives is markedly lower. A better understanding of these differences will help ensure that mental health support that is better tailored to specific work settings.”

Read the full [Workplace Mental Health in Midlands firms 2024 report](#).

Further reading

[How did the pandemic affect mental health in the workplace?](#)

[The dilemma at the heart of an employee wellbeing strategy](#)

[Can power naps boost your productivity?](#)

[Maria Wishart](#) is a Research Fellow and a member of the Enterprise Research Centre.

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