



**Corporate Mental Health  
Alliance** AUSTRALIA



# Early in career: laying the foundations for good mental health

**Thriving from the Start**

Early in Career Research Report

November 2021



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## Executive Summary

The Corporate Mental Health Alliance Australia 'Thriving from the Start' Early in Career (EIC) Program was developed in order to understand the challenges and concerns young employees face as they embark on their careers, and to highlight to organisations the impact workplace experiences can have on the mental health of early in career employees.

This research was undertaken utilising lived experience discussions with member organisation focus group participants, with insights gained informing the Annual Survey of early in career employees, which will be conducted in 2022.

## Executive Summary

### Key Findings

The key findings highlight the general perceptions, current workplace experiences (through a COVID-19 lens) and the importance of leadership and culture in impacting the mental health of young employees. Early in career action points are provided for organisations in order for them to better support mental health. Analysis of participant responses revealed the following key themes:



#### Starting Out: Mental Health Perceptions

When applying for roles, organisational mental health policies and resources were not high on the EIC employee checklist. The perception of an organisational culture surrounding mental health, however, was important, and informed the choice of organisation for the majority of participants.

Mental health and wellbeing resources are not widely accessed and utilised by early in career employees. There was limited awareness, along with a basic knowledge, of the availability and accessibility of these resources early in their career. The importance of organisational support of mental health and wellbeing is often only realised after employment has commenced.

Employees, particularly graduates, in the early stages of their career don't necessarily understand the influential and all-encompassing role their organisation may play in their lives. It becomes a major consideration however, when choosing future roles, based on their EIC experience.

#### On the Line: Thriving in the Workplace

EIC employees often find themselves having to make a choice. Do they support their mental health by working reasonable hours and making time for self-care activities, or be a team player and capitalise on development opportunities that may mean extra work commitments and hours? Guilt and fear of repercussions on their career progression may impact young employees' decision-making, leading to choices that can adversely affect their mental health and wellbeing. Stigma remains with taking mental health leave.

EIC employees do focus on developing their personal skills for managing their mental health and feel competent they can do so. They are acutely aware that prevention of mental ill-health is a more beneficial option than having to deal with prospective issues and challenges around their mental health down the track.

#### Walking the Talk: The Role of Culture and Leadership

What is vocalised at the top doesn't necessarily filter all the way down. Senior leaders and managers need to prove to EIC employees they can 'walk the talk' and that mental health and wellbeing is embedded into organisational culture.

Showing vulnerability is an important leadership trait for EIC employees, who appreciate seeing the more 'human' side of their managers. This helps to create a culture of psychological safety for EIC employees and the benefits that follow.

The wellbeing of young employees and, ultimately, their experience in an organisation is fundamentally influenced by their managers. Managers need to be trained and equipped to guide and develop EIC employees in their first years in an organisation in order to set them up for success and ensure they thrive in their roles.

#### The Graduate Experience: the Power of the Network

The graduate and intern cohort is an integral support network for EIC employees. They rely on one another for information, advice and for support when feeling vulnerable.

#### The Next Level: What Organisations Can Do Now

Based on the feedback from the focus group participants, the top ten points for action for organisations are detailed below.





## Background

Today young people are facing mental health challenges unparalleled by any other age group. Although a recent report by Black Dog Institute found an overall decline in the mental health and wellbeing scores of all employees since 2010, this was particularly notable in the 15-24-year-old cohort.

Recent research conducted into the mental health and wellbeing of 1000 early in career employees<sup>1</sup> also reported the impact on mental health by the COVID-19 pandemic. The research found:

**72%**

reported experiencing  
**poor mental health**  
within the last 12 months

**45%**

experienced  
**low moods**

**17%**

have had  
**suicidal thoughts**

**1 in 50**

have  
**attempted suicide**

<sup>1</sup>CMHA UK (2021). Time to Act: Mental Health in Early Careers.  
<https://citymha.org.uk/docs/CMHA-Time-To-Act-Report.pdf> accessed 4/11/2021.



## Background

Young people entering the workforce for the first time are particularly vulnerable when it comes to their mental health and wellbeing. A 2019 University of Melbourne study for the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, *Young People, Transition into Work and Mental Wellbeing* found evidence that young adulthood is typically characterised by a series of critical transitions during which mental health and wellbeing can be compromised, in particular the transition from education to work.

Contributing to this, young people often lack the confidence and coping strategies employed by older workers, and experience additional life pressures such as moving from home, financial independence, relationship breakdowns and applying for jobs. Once in a role, job stressors such as high performance expectations, excessive workloads and job security can also contribute to mental ill-health.

It's not all bad news. EIC workers today have greater mental health literacy than any generation before them. Discussions around mental health are common in schools and universities; resources, support and counselling are available if needed and there is less of stigma attached to accessing mental health support than there has been in the past.

While remote working has contributed to feelings of isolation, lack of support and social networking opportunities for some, the home and hybrid workplace has in some instances supported the mental health of younger workers, through opportunities for work flexibility, self-determination and the ability to build trust with colleagues and peers.



## Why is this important?

The impact of mental health ill-health on businesses is substantial.

In 2019, the Productivity Commission estimated that workplace mental ill-health cost the Australian economy \$39 billion. Mental ill-health contributes to workplace absenteeism and presenteeism, reduced employee productivity, and increased cost of workers compensation claims, leading to higher premiums.

Investing in employee mental health and wellbeing is a sound financial decision with up to a \$4.70 per dollar spent return on investment for psychological conditions and return to work programs.<sup>2</sup> Organisations invest heavily in training and graduate programs for young people, with the goal of attracting the best talent and higher retention rates of young people. An article by the Harvard Business Review cites that employees in high-trust organisations are more productive, have more energy at work, collaborate more effectively, stay with employers longer and suffer less stress<sup>3</sup>.

Organisations have a legal responsibility to provide a safe and healthy workplace, both mentally and physically. The benefits to organisations in placing appropriate support structures in place to create mentally healthy workplaces for EIC employees in particular cannot be underestimated. The workplace can have a significant impact on the mental health of young employees, and there remains a huge opportunity for organisations to be a positive influence<sup>4</sup>. EIC employees expect their employers will support their mental health. Nine in ten EIC employees believe their organisation has a responsibility to support the positive mental health and wellbeing of their people, and 47% say prioritising mental health is one of the most important things they would look for in a future employer.

Young workers are the future leaders. It's essential that organisations focus on getting it right from the start, by understanding and supporting the needs of EIC employees with respect to their mental health, enabling them to reach their full potential and thrive in the workplace.

<sup>2</sup>Black Dog Institute (2021). Modern Work: how changes to the way we work are impacting on Australians' mental health. [https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/modern\\_work.pdf](https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/modern_work.pdf) (accessed 12/11/2021)

<sup>3</sup>The *Neuroscience of Trust* article featured in the January/February 2017 issue of Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr-org.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/hbr.org/amp/2017/01/the-neuroscience-of-trust> (accessed 3/11/2021)

<sup>4</sup>CMHA UK (2021). Time to Act: Mental Health in Early Careers. <https://citymha.org.uk/docs/CMHA-Time-To-Act-Report.pdf> accessed 4/11/2021.



### Time to Act: Mental Health in Early Careers

#### Research and Recommendations Report for Business: City Mental Health Alliance, UK

Released in November 2021, this report details research commissioned by CMHA UK in partnership with BUPA and details the state of mental health in young professionals in the first four years of their career. It also highlights the action young workers would like their organisations to take in supporting their mental health and wellbeing.

#### Key findings include:

- **There is a high incidence of poor mental health (low mood, severe stress, panic attacks, anxiety):** 72% indicated they have experienced poor mental health within the last 12 months
- **Poor mental health is having an impact on business:** 61% of workers said poor mental health impacted their ability to do their job well and concentrate at work
- **Work is a significant contributing factor:** 60% have experienced burnout due to work at some point in their career
- **COVID-19 and lockdowns put a strain on many:** 69% experienced loneliness
- **There is a clear expectation and desire for employers to support mental health:** nine in ten young professionals believe employers have a responsibility to support the positive mental health and wellbeing of their people
- **Mental health stigma at work is high:** only 27% would feel comfortable seeking support through work
- **Many employers are already playing a role in supporting positive mental health:** 49% reported their employer had supported their mental health over the past 12 months during the pandemic
- **Respondents point to action businesses could take to support their positive mental health:** Nearly half would like reassurance accessing mental health support through work would not impact their career
- **Line managers play a critical role in wellbeing support:** 79% indicated having a supportive and approachable line manager would have a positive impact on their mental health
- **Young people feel a responsibility to support others:** 84% think it's important to develop mental health awareness skills at work so they can support a colleague in need



Access the full report

<https://citymha.org.uk/docs/CMHA-Time-To-Act-Report.pdf>

**72%**  
experienced **poor mental health** within the last 12 months



## Background

It's not 1 in 4, it's all of us:  
why supporting the mental  
health of young workers starts  
with organisational culture

This 2019 report prepared by Accenture and commissioned by UK-based mental health support organisation This Can Happen, looks at the role of organisational culture, its impact on young employees and the steps these organisations can take to improve mental health and wellbeing in their workplaces. Interviewing nearly 2,000 EIC employees across the UK resulted in the following findings:

**95%**  
**will have been touched  
by mental health  
challenges** (their own,  
or those of friends, family or  
co-workers) by the time they  
reach 30 years of age

  
**three out  
of four** will have  
**experienced such a  
challenge** personally

**half** of the   
**respondents** aged  
18-25 joined the workforce  
without having received  
any training, information  
and advice on taking  
care of their mental health

**69%**   
of job-seeking students  
and graduates say they  
**have lived, or are  
living, with mental  
health issues**

By the time young people join the workforce,  
many have already **experienced mental  
health challenges**







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## The Research

This research, conducted by the Corporate Mental Health Alliance Australia (CMHAA), reveals the experience of mental health in the workplace amongst employees in the first eight years of their career. The focus group findings highlight the general perceptions, current experiences of young people in the workforce and the importance of leadership and culture in impacting the mental health of young employees. Importantly, it offers insights into what early in career employees would like businesses to do to better support their mental health.



# The Research

## Focus Groups

Early in career employees were identified by CMHAA member organisations and invited to join the focus groups. Participation was voluntary and each volunteer was given an information sheet to read and a consent form to sign prior to their focus group.

A discussion guide was used to guide the conversation and the questions focused on three key themes:

- General expectations of the role of organisations in supporting workplace mental health and wellbeing from recruitment through to retention of early in career employees
- Current experiences of their workplace and the mental health-specific support and resources offered by their organisations
- Perceptions on leadership and culture surrounding workplace mental health

A total of 36 people participated in four focus groups held in October 2021. Focus groups were held virtually and were approximately 90 minutes in length. Focus groups were led by an experienced facilitator, with the assistance of a co-facilitator. An observer attended each session to record the discussion. A debrief session was held by the researchers after each session to review themes and key insights.

Each session was recorded and transcribed, and thematically analysed. The responses, themes and sub-themes identified inform the key findings detailed in this report.

### Limitations

All research has limitations. This study is qualitative by nature and not generalisable to the entire Australian EIC employee population. It was conducted with volunteers and is thus limited by the self-selecting nature. Whilst a number of focus groups were conducted, these findings do not always represent a consensus, rather a series of views that are context dependent, and influenced by the various individual beliefs, narratives and experiences of those that participated in the focus groups.

## Participant Demographics

For the purposes of this research, early in career is defined as young professionals aged between 18 and 30 and/or in the first eight years of their career.

<b>Number of participants</b>	36
<b>Females</b>	22
<b>Males</b>	14
<b>Age</b>	18-30
<b>Education</b>	University level (majority)
<b>Number of organisations</b>	8
<b>Industries</b>	Legal Retail Professional Services Insurance Health Technology
<b>Entry into organisation</b>	Multiple entry points including intern, graduate program, direct hire





## Key Findings

Analysis revealed four overarching themes across the focus groups, along with several sub-themes. The findings highlight the importance of understanding needs, challenges and experiences of early in career employees in order to better support their mental health and wellbeing and ensure they thrive as they embark on their careers.

## Key Findings

### Starting Out: Mental Health Perceptions

#### General expectations

Participants were asked about their expectations of the role of organisations with respect to mental health and wellbeing.

The majority of participants agreed on high-level, overarching fundamentals such as a duty of care for employees, availability of mental health resources and services, employee assistance programs and instructions on where to find information and how to use the programs and services.

Participants believed that organisations have a responsibility to support the mental health and wellbeing of their employees, but that this can only come when wellbeing and mental health is embedded into organisational culture. Mental health policies, wellbeing training and resources were reported as being only minimally used, publicised or attended to and participants suggested they did not contribute to the reality of EIC employees.

*"There is a difference between what I ideally expect versus what I realistically expect. I would expect them to issue instructions on how to access mental health services and employee assistance programs so I can find information. Ideally, organisations should start conversations and create environments conducive to positive mental health."*

FG1, participant 5/9, technology



They also agreed mental health isn't just a day or a month where organisations focus on employee mental health. Participants reported disappointment that the hype and positivity surrounding days like 'R U OK Day' were not maintained over the course of the year.

*"Events are held but lack follow through, such as R U OK Day. Nothing came of it; everyone went back to work. There is an understanding and acceptance that mental illness is embedded in culture to foster open and collaborative relationships."*

FG1, participant 1/9, legal

It was clear in the discussions that participants were keen to see the normalisation of mental ill-health in the workplace. Conversations should occur frequently and employees need to feel safe asking for assistance or time off if needed, as they would for a physical illness. Concerns, however, were expressed by some participants over issues of confidentiality, linking mental ill-health to poor performance and the associated professional repercussions in terms of promotion and opportunity.

*"I wouldn't use the formal things they have in place – I have a slight distrust. I am concerned about my confidentiality. If I had to see a counsellor or therapist, I would go external. I would speak to a trusted colleague but not about formal things – I'm too paranoid."*

FG3, participant 8/10, legal

Cultural background was a factor. For some, within their culture, mental health issues are not discussed openly with parents or family, which may impact how these young employees perceive and engage in conversations around mental health in the workplace.

*"In the culture I come from, mental health is further stigmatised as a cultural thing. I haven't had open discussions with my parents about mental health. There is a cultural lens for mental health and how people view and value mental health – there can be a clash there."*

FG3, participant 3/10, technology



## Key Findings

### Recruitment and onboarding

Most agreed they weren't specifically looking at their organisation's mental health policies when they were searching for or starting roles, but now, a number of years into their careers, it would be a determining factor in future career moves. For many, their concern was to secure their job first and worry about everything else later.

*"There was talk of flexible work/life balance and taking breaks, but it felt like it wasn't a big factor. I was so grateful to get the job I thought I would just find out later."*

FG2, participant 7/9, professional services

Often, there was limited information on an organisation's mental health and wellbeing policies and resources when they were looking at the role, or during onboarding. Some commented that information on mental health resources was not available in marketing material.

Participants reported, however, they didn't necessarily place trust in the 'sell story' but instead relied upon personal conversations with peers, friends and junior employees about their experience working at each organisation. Even if culture, particularly around mental health, wasn't discussed in interviews, participants were able to form a picture of this through discussions and questioning during the interview process.

*"Culture in my new role was a huge selling point for me. We are not just looking for a job, we want the whole package."*

FG1, participant 2/9, legal

The majority admitted they simply did not know what they were coming into when they started their role, and had no idea what problems and challenges they may encounter, which could impact their mental health. They agreed having clarity on what corporate life would be like would have been beneficial.

*"Don't lie. When you are asked by someone coming in about mental health in your organisation, don't lie to people who have had no corporate experience."*

FG2, participant 5/9, legal

However, some said they came into the organisation with their eyes wide open regarding expectations of workload and commitment.

Mental health was discussed during induction and initial training periods; however many participants felt that it had limited impact as it was introduced when they had had minimal exposure to workplace challenges. It was suggested that a refresh of these discussions should occur after six months of employment and on a more ongoing basis. Some felt that EIC employees should be involved with junior recruitment, so they could share their experiences with those commencing a new role after graduating university.

*"Involving junior people in junior recruitments in graduate assessment centres is a great way of sharing experiences. Managers have the business understanding of what they are looking for, but juniors can speak to 'I was where you are now two years ago, and this is what was valuable'."*

FG2, participant 8/9, professional services

### So what?

Mental health policies, wellbeing training and resources are minimally used, publicised and may not meet the needs of EIC employees. These findings suggest that there is an opportunity for organisations to do more around educating future employees about the mental health support available, and how and when they might use it.

EIC employees may only come to perceive the importance of organisational support of the mental health and wellbeing of their workers after they commence their employment, perhaps not realising the influential role that work may play in their life. This presents opportunities for organisations to implement structures and supports for EIC employees from onboarding and throughout their early years.

While mental health support per se was not an important factor for participants when first applying for roles, the perception of an organisational culture surrounding mental health was critical. This suggests recruitment strategies for organisations wishing to attract EIC should actively engage junior employees in their recruitment stages and ensure these employees fully understand and communicate the importance of the mental health and wellbeing support is available.

## Key Findings

### COVID-19: Adapting and Stepping Up

Could what we learned during the global pandemic help shape new opportunities for supporting early in career employees?

While remote working contributed to feelings of isolation and lack of support and social networking opportunities, it has also offered benefits to early in career employees – specifically opportunities to work flexibly, for self-determination and for vulnerability to be openly expressed in the workplace. This has given EIC employees the ability to build trust with colleagues and peers. Incorporating some of these new ways of working and behaving into the post-COVID-19 workplace may benefit employers and employees alike.

*“There are cameras into people’s lives and homes, and this has been a catalyst for conversations and interest in people’s lives. We have now seen what truly flexible work arrangements are.”*

**FG1, participant 5/9, technology**

The majority expressed concern that non-verbal cues that may indicate a colleague is struggling are missed in a virtual working environment. It is easy to ‘put on a brave face’ on camera – which is harder to do in the office. It was agreed constant check-ins on a deeper level were required.

*“Things are returning to normal and those weekly meetings have now been cancelled – why? They brought the team closer together. There is no reason we can’t take 30 minutes out each week to check in on each other.”*

**FG1, participant 3/9, pharmaceutical**

*“We had direct calls from senior people proactively seeking knowledge about where everyone was on a regular basis. It was an interesting thing to come out of COVID as they weren’t exposed to us on a daily basis. I hope it continues beyond COVID.”*

**FG2, participant 8/9, professional services**

It is important to note that a number of participants commenced their roles virtually and had to navigate their own support networks, responsibilities and boundaries as there was no one to learn from.

What is interesting is the change in attitude as the global pandemic evolved. Organisational tone at the start of COVID-19 was that junior employees should be grateful they had jobs, remain thankful and keep quiet, yet once it became evident that hybrid working environments were here to stay, the tone was more positive. Some participants reported unease about future working arrangements and the challenges they will bring.

#### Opportunities

- Exposure to senior leaders
- One-on-one discussions with managers
- Deeper level conversations
- Building trust through flexible working arrangements
- Invitations into colleagues’ lives and homes; seeing their ‘human’ side
- Self-determination of working style
- Time for self-care activities
- No late nights in the office
- Mental health brought to the forefront

#### Challenges

- Lack of workplace social interactions and connections
- Narrowed pool of colleagues
- Feeling of constant connection
- Pressure to respond 24-7
- Feeling unsupported: out of sight, out of mind
- Working with people never met in person
- Difficulty interacting in a virtual environment



## Key Findings

### On the Line: Thriving in the Workplace

#### Current experiences of work and impact on mental health

Much discussion focused on the ability, willingness and responsibility of the participant organisations to put the following structures in place to ensure EIC employees thrive and avoid mental health challenges:

- appropriate job design
- tolerable workloads and realistic deadlines
- provision of resources
- time allocation
- clarity of role, expectations and responsibilities
- structured, clear targets and actionable feedback
- opportunities for growth

Participants highlighted the need for clarity of role expectations, responsibilities and accountabilities for EIC employees and the reality that it may take them longer to complete tasks relative to their peers. It takes time to process what is expected of them when starting a career in an organisation – the reins need to be slowly removed from the more structured environments of school and university as EIC employees transition into professional roles.

*“You are pulled in 1000 directions while still trying to learn, you are expected to do things people who have been there 10 years are doing. It would support my mental health a lot better to have clarity on the expectations of me in my role.”*

FG1, participant 4/7, pharmaceutical

*“Everything is a priority! You need to know clearly what your job is and what is expected of you. We need to have a bar to follow so we can see success. When things are vague you don’t feel you get anything done.”*

FG1, participant 6/9, technology

#### Support and resources

The majority view was that organisations are ‘ticking boxes’ in having mental health policies and resources. These resources are often not accessed by EIC as they don’t see benefit in them and/or don’t necessarily know where to look for them. The majority view was that they didn’t know what resources or support would be needed. As graduates in their first roles, many underestimated how big a role their organisation would play in their lives.

*“Every workplace will say the same thing about mental health, diversity, inclusion and culture. Ultimately, it’s meaningless as you have to walk the talk.”*

FG2, participant 2/9, legal

Many expressed frustration that the responsibility to manage mental health was placed on the young employee, when the job demands were often incongruent with supporting good mental health in the workplace.

*“No amount of yoga will save you from a toxic workplace culture or give you nine hours sleep. When these things are offered it flips the responsibility – ‘it is YOUR responsibility to manage your mental health and anything we do is a bonus.’ It is a problematic angle.”*

FG2, participant 2/9, legal



*“We get resilience training and lip service to the concept of mental health, which is putting the responsibility onto the employee. This is very frustrating. I have a supportive team and manager but the culture comes from the whole firm, so expectations need to be clear on mental health care. It is not the employee’s sole responsibility.”*

FG2, participant 8/9, professional services

## Key Findings



### Factors that support workplace mental health

Autonomy was highlighted, but opinion was divided. Several expressed frustration they weren't trusted with autonomy within their role, while others commented that too much autonomy creates stress. Participants agreed reverse mentoring and whole-of-organisation networking were critical in supporting their mental health and sense of connection.

*"Organisations should connect staff at different levels so they can make genuine connections. Many businesses are hierarchical. Creating connection opportunities across grades can help with mentoring and a sense of belonging. Bring the empathy you would want your child, friend or neighbour to receive in their workplace to YOUR workplace. The payoff would be enormous – financial or otherwise."*

FG2, participant 5/9, legal

### Managing mental health: the 'skills toolkit'

Most participants felt that at this point in their career they had developed a credible personal toolkit to handle mental health challenges.

*"I have had my fair share of struggles and have been developing my personal toolkit – I know when I am on the brink of falling into the pit. Understanding how the firm's structures support this is key. I can't ask for time off or breaks in isolation – I need the firm's support. Have your own skill set and then tap into the firm's resources."*

FG4, participant 7/8, legal

Many knew how to manage their mental health in terms of exercise, social interactions outside of work, engaging in self-care activities and developing resilience. However, they conceded they needed to build the required workplace skills in managing workloads, being able to push back on unreasonable work demands and managing competing expectations. Several participants were learning these skills from mentors and coaches.

Participants agreed that the development of their toolkit is seen as a preventative measure in developing mental health issues further down the track. Organisations can be adept at stepping in and intervening when there is a crisis, however, could learn from EIC employees and their focus on attempting to prevent a crisis in the first place.

*"Prevention is always better than cure – having early intervention conversations with your manager is important."*

FG3, participant 10/10, insurance

*"Models of psychology are that you only get help when you are in the pit, rather than intervening earlier in the piece. There is a lot of science in this space that isn't in the narrative of the leaders."*

FG4, participant 4/8, professional services



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## Key Findings

### The differing needs of EIC

Recognition is needed that EIC employees have different needs and priorities to experienced hires. There are not many role models in a similar life stage and participants expressed they are continually compared to experienced hires. Some EICs also commented about the frustration caused by their needs being deprioritised relative to the needs of other employees e.g. working parents. They also accepted they need initial support in determining their work/life balance.

*"This is our first fulltime job outside of university. We need to figure out where we fit within the team and the larger organisation."*

FG1, participant 6/9, technology

### Mental health days: the stigma

Participants reported that managers have differing expectations across teams in terms of work/life balance. Some feel hesitant about asking for a wellbeing day as there is a stigma attached to it – it is OK to ask for a day off for their birthday, but not for wellbeing.

*"The administration and bureaucracy involved in taking a wellbeing day is arduous – often it is easier just to push through until the weekend."*

FG1, participant 7/9, technology

Some participants commented they felt guilty taking mental health days or leaving the office early and expressed concerns they may lose ownership of a project or miss developmental opportunities if they logged off early.

Some participants commented that although their managers encouraged them to take time off, they don't take time off themselves which made them feel hesitant to ask for it.

*"There is nothing more important than time and nothing that can replace it. It's an uncomfortable thing to ask for in an organisation where time literally equates to money, but it is necessary."*

FG2, participant 1/9, legal



## Key Findings

### So what?

EIC employees admit that while they don't need everything spelled out for them in detail, their needs are different to those of experienced hires as they transition into the workforce. They require clarity of their roles, responsibilities and the expectations of them. Organisations would benefit from giving greater attention to job design so EIC employees are not having to regularly make trade-off decisions between their mental health and wellbeing against being a team player and development opportunities. High pressure and tight turnaround times are a necessity of certain roles, however greater application of forced recovery time and/or protected evenings within each team could be a suitable solution.

There is a stigma attached to taking mental health leave and many EIC employees feel reluctant to take days off. Simplifying the administration involved in requesting time off would assist in the willingness to take it as well as show greater role modelling from leaders.

EIC employees perceive that they have the personal resources and skills as well as the desire to manage their mental health, but they need organisations to allow them to engage in these activities and help them protect against mental ill-health. There is an opportunity for organisations to redefine the type of wellbeing support they provide to these employees, focusing less on self-care activities and resilience-building and more on practical skills to manage workloads, stakeholders and prioritisation.

EIC employees place value on the creation of a culture that focuses on the prevention of mental ill-health over the availability of support and resources once issues occur.



**There is an opportunity for organisations to redefine the type of wellbeing support that they provide to these employees, focusing less on self-care activities and resilience-building and more on practical skills to manage workloads, stakeholders and prioritisation.**



## Key Findings

### Walking the Talk: the Role of Culture and Leadership

#### Leadership culture

A key message from each of the four focus groups was that the relationship between EIC employees and their direct managers is crucial to positive mental health and the ability to thrive in the role. Much discussion centred around the role of the manager and the expectations of EIC employees. Participants shared experiences – both positive and negative, which highlighted the impact managers have and the importance of the role they play for their EIC employees.

*“This is the largest indicator of happiness for EIC – the readiness of managers to support them.”*

FG3, participant 4/10, technology

The overarching view was that in a perfect world, managers should model the behaviours set by senior leadership. Positive examples are set, support systems are in place, mental health and wellbeing is discussed openly, people feel comfortable to be able to speak up – and this should filter down through the organisation.

The majority, however, felt that the reality was often very different, to the point where all the positive modelling in the world at the top of the organisation is irrelevant for EIC employees. For them, it boils down to their relationship with their direct managers.

*“I have always been open about how I feel – it comes down to the relationship I have with my manager. For me it’s the modelling piece. It has made me feel comfortable to open up and feel vulnerable. I can speak up when feeling anxious and I know they aren’t going to judge me. They modelled this for me.”*

FG1, participant 8/9, retail

A generational cultural disconnect was commented on, with some participants observing that senior managers started in a different period and have built resilience over time. There was a sense that if pressurised situations aren’t created, development isn’t being fostered.

Others noted their leadership was young and had ‘grown up’ in this changing culture and understand they will lose their graduates if they aren’t treated well.

#### The dilemma of being vulnerable

Vulnerability was a key theme that emerged from manager discussions. Several participants detailed experiences of managers being emotional on calls, due to stress, workload and feeling burnt out. The majority felt that the showing of vulnerability and openness made managers human and relatable, and provided comfort that if it happened to them, it would be OK to share how they felt.

There remained, however, a sense of fear of being held back from promotions and opportunities or experiencing repercussions if they showed vulnerability or signs of struggling with mental health themselves.



Many participants expressed disappointment with other work colleagues who viewed vulnerability as a sign of weakness – the sentiment being they shouldn’t be in the position if they can’t handle it and that showing vulnerability seemed to mean they were not cut out for the environment.

*“I heard comments that when people cried, they were held back from promotions because managers weren’t advocating for them as they knew they had been struggling with mental health. I don’t say too much. I have heard people don’t feel comfortable opening up.”*

FG1, participant 2/9, legal

## Key Findings

### Equipping managers to support EIC employees

The majority believe it is very important managers receive training on managing employee mental health and wellbeing, and that it should be linked to their KPIs. They believe this will aid in carrying the message down from the top. Managers need to be given the time and resources to lead and develop their EIC employees.

*"Managers and teams need to buy into the reasons EIC people are in roles and need to be empowered and equipped to support their onboarding."*

FG3, participant 4/10, technology

Where manager training in mental health had been conducted in organisations, participants reported a positive experience. Reverse mentoring also helped managers to understand EIC employee perspectives. They felt managers need to lead by example – working late at night makes other team members feel they need to as well.



*"My manager was clear about flexibility, ensuring I worked to my schedule – but able to take time off too. This gave me ease in having control over my schedule. It gave me structure in terms of how my manager wanted me to work within the team which contributed to my wellbeing."*

FG1, participant 5/9, technology

*"We have regular meetings with our managers, checking we are not overstressing ourselves and ensuring we take leave. They make sure we are learning and progressing, not just doing work."*

FG4, 2/8, retail

A couple of participants commented they were the first person in their family to work in a corporate organisation and lacked a role model. They had high expectations their manager would act as an example, as they were unaware of what was 'normal', such as reasonable work hours, workload management and communication. Reflections and vulnerable feedback from managers helps to foster a sense of empathy and understanding with EIC employees.

**Managers act as role models in terms of their working styles and behaviour, which is particularly influential for those who are EIC as they require more support.**

### So what?

A disparity exists between the expectations of EIC employees in terms of leadership culture and their actual experience. The importance of mental health and wellbeing is vocalised at the most senior level of organisations, but this doesn't necessarily filter down to EICs – it is entirely dependent on their managers. Senior leaders can model behaviours, share experiences and champion mental health, but this has very little impact for EICs unless it is embedded in the culture and flows through all levels of the organisation.

Leaders who are prepared to show vulnerability are well-regarded by EICs. Highlighted during remote working, managers who admitted they felt stressed or burnt out and shared these experiences were viewed as more 'human' and relatable to EIC employees. They were subsequently disappointed when these managers were viewed as weak or unfit for their role by other employees, which makes EICs cautious about showing their own vulnerabilities for fear of professional repercussions.

The wellbeing of EICs is fundamentally influenced by their managers. Managers act as role models in terms of their working styles and behaviour, which is particularly influential for those who are EIC as they require more support than an experienced hire and are often without other frames of reference. Managerial role modelling and support is very important for EIC employees from diverse backgrounds. This high level of influence underscores the importance of having appropriately selected managers for EIC employees as well as providing these managers with mental health training.



## Examples of initiatives

### Black Dog Institute's Interactive Workshop

Black Dog Institute recognises that senior leaders and managers play a pivotal role in fostering positive mental health and wellbeing in their workplaces through:

- behaviour modelling
- observing signs of mental ill-health
- taking action where required
- integrating team members back into work after a period of absence

To better equip leaders with skills in understanding the prevalence of mental ill-health, recognising behavioural changes, designing healthy workspaces and supporting team members, the Institute offers interactive training workshops for organisations, conducted by qualified clinicians.



#### Find out more

<https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/education-services/workplaces/workplace-programs/managing-for-team-wellbeing/>

### Microsoft's 'REAL Mates' Training Program

Microsoft's 'REAL Mates', is a mental health peer support program. A REAL Mate is a peer at Microsoft Australia whom employees can contact when they're seeking help. The program provides a safe, judgement-free way for employees to discuss, in confidence, any challenges they might be facing.



## Key Findings



### The Graduate Experience: the Power of the Network

The overwhelming majority of participants detailed very positive experiences within their graduate and intern programs. EIC employees rely heavily on their cohort for support, information and networking. They compare experiences, and confirm for each other what is 'normal' and what is not.

*"Competition amongst graduates has gone away; everyone is happy to run their own race. I learnt this early doors."*

**FG4, participant 7/8, legal**

Structure and support for graduate programs is key to their ability to thrive. Managers can be given graduates they aren't prepared for and they don't have the time to manage their entry into the firm, resulting in a negative experience for EIC employees.

*"Are we there as cheap headcount or to add value? We are told we are there to bring new ideas, develop as leaders."*

**FG3, participant 4/10, technology**

*"The standardisation piece is very important. Teams receive interns, graduates and EICs without really wanting them – they need a story and value proposition behind getting an EIC person."*

**FG1, Participant 5/9, technology**

#### Coaching and mentoring

Participants commented that many of their graduate programs had solid coaching and mentoring structures, which they

appreciated. Coaches and support networks help EIC employees to navigate different management styles and workplace challenges. Mental health pillars were built and have kept improving. During COVID-19, in some organisations managers reached out to all graduates to check in on them. They had access to resources online and a telephone hotline.

*"We started out in the graduate program with solid structures. It was handy having coaches and a support network as we had different management styles in each store."*

**FG4, participant 2/8, retail**

Other organisations provide graduates with 'buddies' from different teams, which helped them expand their support network and they got to know more people in the organisation, locally and interstate. Senior leaders would often join intern calls to check in on junior employees.

EIC employees commented that there was variability in the coaching and mentoring experience across their graduate and intern cohorts. Some participants reported having 'old school' coaches who were hard on them and didn't invite two-way feedback and discussion. Others had been given supportive mentors who had an 'open door' policy, worked well with graduates, and enjoyed regular meetings to ensure they were learning and progressing.

*"There is an upward coaching model in my organisation. These discussions are always candid – my coach is great. Other people aren't as lucky and there is a stigma around changing coaches. It is important for me to have someone who backs me as a friend."*

**FG4, participant 4/8, professional services**



## Key Findings

### Placing trust in EIC

The majority expressed that trust was very important to them – graduates want their managers to trust that they are getting their work done, and to also trust that they can manage their work/life balance. Prior to COVID-19, it was unusual for graduates to work from home and to have discretion in how they did their work, so remote working has helped to build this trust and demonstrate that quality outputs can still be achieved.

*"I have the potential to be someone; to shape the organisation at the end of this program. I can be bold, reach for the stars and deliver without consequence."*

FG3, participant 5/10, retail

### Appreciating junior employees

All participants commented that as juniors they brought value to an organisation. For them, it was important to feel and be told this, however this feedback was not always forthcoming.

*"Juniors don't realise they value they bring to the organisation; you feel you owe them everything because you have been hired – prove loyalty and reliability – we forget as juniors we bring a lot of energy and different perspectives. We need to be reminded of the value we bring."*

FG1, participant 7/9, technology

### Tools for success for EIC

Participants shared tools their organisations employ to assist them in managing their workloads and settling into the organisation:

- **protected time:** spending the first weeks on internal projects before seeing clients, assisting with settling in and getting to know people
- **time reallocation:** lunch slot calendar invites are sent for each day, as well as start-up invites on Monday mornings and wrap-up invites for Friday afternoons. This gives graduates time to complete work, enables them to feel productive and stops the cycle of working late
- **regular one-on-one check-ins:** check-ins with coaches that go beyond a discussion of work and focus on how EIC employees are coping both in and outside the workplace
- **autonomy:** giving graduates more autonomy on how they get their work done and manage the work/life balance
- **connection:** providing graduates with opportunities to share their point of view

**Graduates with managers and coaches/mentors who are willing to invest the time required and have the necessary skills for guidance in the first years of EIC careers are set up to succeed.**

### So what?

The graduate/intern cohort is an integral support network for EIC employees. They rely on one another for information about other organisations, advice on how to approach work issues and for support when feeling vulnerable. Graduates with managers and coaches/mentors who are willing to invest the time required and have the necessary skills for guidance in the first years of EIC careers are set up to succeed. It is imperative managers and coaches/mentors are equipped to be able to support graduates and interns and oversee their development.

There are a number of tools available to organisations to support EIC employees. Offering them exposure to the wider organisation through networking, coaching and mentoring opportunities is key, as well as regular check-ins, one-on-ones and constructive feedback. Graduates need to feel listened to, trusted to manage their workload and that they are a valued part of the team.



# The Next Level: What Organisations Can Do

Turning words into actions: the top ten considerations

- 1 Embed mental health and wellbeing into organisational culture and across the employee lifecycle, with an emphasis on promoting wellness and the prevention of mental ill-health
- 2 Engage junior employees in recruitment of graduate employees to communicate the importance of mental health and wellbeing support
- 3 Educate (and re-educate) employees on the mental health support and resources available to them, including assurances around anonymity, explaining how and when they might use them and what they can expect
- 4 Implement greater structures and supports for EIC employees from onboarding and continuing throughout their early years, with particular focus on effective job design
- 5 Simplify administration processes involved in requesting mental health leave
- 6 Redefine mental health and wellbeing training, focusing more on practical workplace skills rather than self-care activities and resilience building
- 7 Encourage leaders at all levels to share their lived experiences and show vulnerability
- 8 Appropriately select managers for EIC employees and empower them with the resources and support required to guide and develop EIC employees
- 9 Provide managers with continuous training in mental health
- 10 Prioritise and enhance peer cohorts for EIC employees through networking, coaching and mentoring opportunities, regular all-of-person check-ins, promoting the trust and value of junior employees





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## Early in Career: Thinking Differently

The lived experience discussion with the CMHAA member organisation focus group participants provided extremely valuable insights into the perspectives of early in career employees on mental health and wellbeing in their workplaces, and their recommendations for future improvements.

This report highlights the need for organisations to think differently to drive essential change in the way they understand, support and respond to the mental health and wellbeing of the early in career employees in the workplace. It is not enough to provide a 'one size fits all' response to workplace mental health.

## Early in Career: Thinking Differently

### Driving Understanding: CMHAA 'Thriving from the Start' Early in Career Program

In response, the Corporate Mental Health Alliance Australia has developed an Early in Career Program in line with their vision for every Australian workplace to be mentally healthy, for people to feel valued and supported and for conversations about mental health to be a normal part of people's working day.

Informed by research and modelled on the CMHA UK program, 'Thriving from the Start' seeks to understand the concerns and challenges young people face as they enter the workforce and commence their careers. CMHAA will utilise insights gained from the program to create awareness and drive improvements in organisational support of the mental health and wellbeing of their young employees. Through this sharing of experiences, there is an opportunity to find, test and deliver solutions that better support the wellbeing of early in career employees in the workforce.

The program of work includes:

- an Annual Survey of young, early in career participants regarding their perspectives, concerns and experiences relating to mental health and wellbeing as they enter the workforce
- an audit of the support currently provided to young, early in career workers by CMHAA member organisations to better understand best practice in delivering support
- CMHAA Annual Survey publication based on survey insights
- formation of an EIC committee, EIC representatives from CMHAA member organisations
- a Thriving from the Start network, run by EIC employees, for EIC employees, offering networking, communications and educational events to early in career employees of member organisations.

And, while we don't have all the answers, the key themes identified in this report and findings from the research undertaken by CHMA UK will inform the questions for the Annual Survey of member organisation EIC employees aged 18-30 years. The survey will be launched in 2022.

By implementing the 'Thriving from the Start' program and network, we hope as an Alliance we can contribute to the conversation as well as deliver improvements in the experience of workplace mental health across our member organisations. In doing so, we hope all early in career employees can thrive.



**Through this sharing of experiences, there is an opportunity to find, test and deliver solutions that better support the wellbeing of early in career employees in the workforce.**







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