

Wellbeing in Major Projects

Study Report



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**MAJOR PROJECTS
ASSOCIATION**

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Contents	3
Introduction	5
Why is understanding and tackling wellbeing and mental health important?	5
How is wellbeing understood?	6
Where does poor wellbeing and mental health come from?	7
How does poor wellbeing and mental health affect us?	8
Can we measure wellbeing?	8
Five steps to better mental wellbeing – an NHS approach	9
Burnout	11
What is burnout?	11
The individual burnout journey	12
What causes burnout?	12
Helping organisations to tackle burnout	13
Guidance is at hand	14
Wellbeing and the major projects sector	15
Covid-19 learnings: achieving life-work balance	16
The current wellbeing situation across the major projects sector	17
Wellbeing throughout your major project career – Project Professional Career Stage qualities: a study	18
Wellbeing – the Major Projects Performance Accelerator: a seminar	19
Wellbeing – what influences burnout in major projects?: a workshop	19
Avoiding burnout – lessons from elite sport seminar: a discussion	22

Case studies	23
Research into character traits that contribute to burnout and the way resilience can impact its severity – Hannah Melville, Glasgow University	23
Resilience as the cure for burnout	24
Defining a health and welfare strategy – Tideway project	25
Work as an enabler for health and wellbeing – Institution of Occupational Health	26
Putting people at the centre of decision-making on the A14 – National Highways	27
Mental Resilience Training – the British Army	27
Switch off campaign – National Grid	28
What action can an employer take to boost wellbeing? – Mind	29
Industry initiatives	31
Building Mental Health	31
Construction Industry Training Board	32
Mates in Mind	33
APM – the wellbeing of project professionals	35
Additional tools and resources	36
Further resources	37

Why is understanding and tackling wellbeing and mental health important?

Major projects are risky places to work. Yet whilst we have made considerable strides in understanding and improving workplace safety, and removing or mitigating the risks of physical injury, we have only started to recognise the importance of personal wellbeing and mental health. Few organisations have established mental health and wellbeing strategies, and fewer still monitor the mental health of employees.

Creating and managing a workable wellbeing policy is complex. Through a series of events, discussions and research the Major Projects Association set out to explore some of these complexities and provide a starting point for organisations seeking to create a policy or to understand the impact of poor wellbeing upon their teams and their projects.

Wellbeing is a principal factor that can have a positive influence on productivity and performance. The upsides of a successful policy are productive, motivated and safe employees, and resilient organisations. The downsides are all risks: of accident, litigation and to reputation as well as levels of performance.

While developing and embedding wellbeing throughout an organisation can help people to feel motivated and empowered to do their job better, it is clear that the major projects sector must go further to place wellbeing at the heart of project delivery. Any organisation-wide wellbeing policy needs to recognise the nature of major projects and the need for project-based employees to perform under pressure and in difficult physical environments – which are different to those employed in business-as-usual endeavours.

High-performing teams will be central to the UK's ability to deliver the increasing number of major projects needed to underpin the post pandemic economic and social recovery. However, the Covid-19 crisis has demonstrated the importance of maintaining the health and wellbeing of team members and highlighted that an increased focus on wellbeing could be the project performance accelerator that we seek.

Rather than simply being seen as 'soft and fluffy' or a 'nice to have' management tool, wellbeing could in fact be the vital missing step towards securing the necessary organisational shift in culture and approach needed to boost productivity and outcomes.

Greater investment in wellbeing is needed, not only as the right thing to do to protect employee mental health but as the critical factor in transforming productivity, efficiency and outcomes across the sector.

Wellbeing – a definition

'The state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy.'

'Wellbeing can be understood as how people feel and how they function, both on a personal and a social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole.'

The New Economics Foundation

How is wellbeing understood?

A person's wellbeing and mental health is impacted over a range of areas experienced in their life. A holistic approach is therefore essential to understand the impact of experiences on an individual and to define and address their specific wellbeing needs.

Within the UK Government's **Care Act 2014**, for example, the promotion of an individual's wellbeing should be considered by a local authority as relating to any of the following:

- Personal dignity (including treatment of the individual with respect)
- Physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing
- Protection from abuse and neglect
- Control by the individual over day-to-day life (including over care and support, or support, provided to the individual and the way in which it is provided)
- Participation in work, education, training or recreation
- Social and economic wellbeing
- Domestic, family and personal relationships
- Suitability of living accommodation
- The individual's contribution to society

There is no hierarchy in the areas of wellbeing listed above – all are equally important, whether applied by a local authority, an employer or any other organisation to those under its care.

Similarly, there is also no single definition of wellbeing. It is multidimensional, and the way it is interpreted will depend on the individual, their circumstances and their priorities. However, it is accepted that positive wellbeing will only be achieved by creating a balance across a number of basic elements that remain central to our lives:

- **Physical:** How we live our lives; what we eat, how we exercise and how we rest.
- **Emotional:** Our ability to cope with everyday life.
- **Social:** Our ability to connect with others – relationships, values, beliefs and traditions.
- **Spiritual:** Finding meaning and purpose in life.
- **Intellectual:** Our ability to expand our knowledge and skills to be successful.
- **Economic:** The ability to meet basic needs and feel secure.

Where does poor wellbeing and mental health come from?

Our bodies are designed to cope with stress and worry – it's an entirely normal and natural thing. The physical responses we experience today are the same that our ancestors experienced when there were constant threats to our survival from predators.

These are the fight, flight, freeze responses triggered by our limbic system which pumps out adrenalin and cortisol that makes our heart beat faster and our breathing speed up. The difference is that today, the threats are often more emotional or psychological and can be over extended periods.

Often due to prolonged periods of stress, uncertainty and anxiety our sympathetic nervous system is over-stimulated, and our body produces stress hormones – cortisol and adrenalin – which can stay in our system too long. These give signals to our brain to shut down all non-essential functioning and to focus on survival. We will find it hard to focus on tasks involving creativity or to be our best most empathetic selves, because all we really want to do – and what our bodies are telling us to do – is hide, run away, or fight.

How does poor wellbeing and mental health affect us?

Alongside poor sleep, impacting our ability to concentrate, or be creative, long-term stress and anxiety makes us irritable and constantly tired.

It can also have a significant physical effect including upset stomach, headaches and over the longer term can make us more susceptible to disease (including cancer) owing to the impact on our immune system.

In contrast, when we manage our wellbeing, and there are many ways that we can, we trigger our parasympathetic nervous system – our ‘rest and digest’ system – which calms our body.

When we can do this, we are better able to tap into our most resourceful, creative and empathetic selves – in short, to show up as our best.

Can we measure wellbeing?

According to the **Mental Health Foundation** (MHF), there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to measuring wellbeing. It suggests that one useful way of measuring wellbeing is the **Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale** (WEMWBS).

This uses a scale of 14 positively worded items, and is designed to measure both the feelings and functioning aspects of positive mental wellbeing. The scale includes items such as ‘I’ve been feeling optimistic about the future’, ‘I’ve been thinking clearly’ and ‘I’ve been interested in new things.’

Participants are asked to choose the answer that best describes their experience of each item over the last two weeks on a scale of 1 to 5, giving a final score of between 14 and 70. A high score indicates a person with greater wellbeing.

But MHF warns that while this is a reasonable way to show improvements in wellbeing over time, to get a broader perspective it is also important to actually ask people how they are feeling and to balance people’s view of their own wellbeing against other indicators relating to health, physical activity and social interaction.

Five steps to better mental wellbeing – an NHS approach

The UK National Health Service has identified and published a simple guide to help people improve their wellbeing. This highlights five key steps that individuals can take to improve their own mental health and wellbeing and to help people to feel more positive and able to get the most out of life.

1. Connect with other people

Good relationships are important for your mental wellbeing. They can:

- Help you to build a sense of belonging and self-worth
- Give you an opportunity to share positive experiences
- Provide emotional support and allow you to support others

2. Be physically active

Being active is not only great for your physical health and fitness. Evidence shows it can also improve your mental wellbeing by:

- Raising your self-esteem
- Helping you to set goals or challenges and achieve them
- Causing chemical changes in your brain which can lead to an improvement in mood

3. Learn new skills

Research shows that learning new skills can also improve your mental wellbeing by:

- Boosting self-confidence and raising self-esteem
- Helping you to build a sense of purpose
- Helping you to connect with others

Even if you feel like you do not have enough time, or you may not need to learn new things, there are lots of different ways to bring learning into your life.

4. Give to others

Research suggests that acts of giving and kindness can help improve your mental wellbeing by:

- Creating positive feelings and a sense of reward
- Giving you a feeling of purpose and self-worth
- Helping you connect with other people

It could be small acts of kindness towards other people, or larger ones like volunteering in your local community.

5. Pay attention to the present moment (mindfulness)

Paying more attention to the present moment can improve your mental wellbeing. This includes your thoughts and feelings, your body and the world around you.

Some people call this awareness 'mindfulness'. Mindfulness can help you enjoy life more and understand yourself better. It can change the way you feel about life and how you approach challenges.

'Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation.'

Viktor Frankl's thoughts
from his book, *Man's Search
for Meaning*.

'Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you react to it.'
Charles Swindoll

John F. Kennedy once observed that the word 'crisis' in Chinese is composed of two characters – one representing danger, the other opportunity. He may not have been entirely correct on the linguistics, but the sentiment is true enough: a crisis presents a choice.

'Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end.'
Seneca, Roman philosopher

What is burnout?

The World Health Organization recently included burnout in its International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as an occupational phenomenon and describes it as: 'a syndrome conceptualised as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.'

It is characterised by three dimensions:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- Increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job
- Reduced professional efficacy

While it has different implications for different people, it is clear that burnout is initiated by individuals being subjected to prolonged stress. General symptoms are exhaustion and loss of motivation, leading to a spiralling decline in performance as people survive on adrenalin. However, identifying and measuring burnout across teams is typically not done well in the sector.

The need to tackle stress in the workforce is a new and emerging risk for organisations and there is a growing need to establish more supportive workplaces to tackle the burnout that follows. However, burnout is only recognised as an occupational disease in Italy and Latvia.

Employers are legally responsible to reduce health risks of their employees. However, according to the 2019 report by EU-OSHA (the European Union occupational health and safety agency), 71% of companies have not intervened to stop people working overly long hours. According to a Gallup poll in 2020, 80% of global workers are experiencing disengagement.

Measures to tackle the problem are not widely known. As was once seen in elite sport, lack of performance is typically treated by working staff harder rather than creating wiser and more targeted solutions to disrupt the pattern of poor behaviour leading to poor performance.

But it is clear that without support, the wellbeing of staff and teams suffers, with a consequential impact on budgets and programmes for major projects.

The individual burnout journey

- Stress – leading to...
- Professional inefficacy – leading to...
- Impeded performance – leading to...
- Job dissatisfaction – leading to...
- Frequent absences...leading to...
- Intention to quit – leading to...
- Hypertension – leading to...
- Cardiovascular issues – leading to...
- Hospitalisation for mental health – leading to...
- Mortality before age 45.

What causes burnout?

There are a number of reasons for burnout in individuals involved in the delivery of major projects including:

- **Unrealistic targets:** The outcome expectations of stakeholders are not matched by the available resources and capabilities.
- **Unrealistic deadlines:** Too many spikes in deadlines causes excessive workload and leads to a perceived or actual inability to meet those challenges or deadlines; those who are good are in demand and so have a high workload and unsustainable working hours.
- **Lack of support:** Insufficient time or skills by senior managers to support staff and teams and create a shared and human vision of outcomes. In particular this is apparent with remote workers who do not get sufficient support or feedback.
- **Increasing digitalisation:** This change in the way projects are managed can lead to information overload and an increasing sense of pressure.
- **Adversarial nature of major projects:** Lack of collaboration with others in the team causes imbalance in objectives across the project or wider supply chain. Conflict between different roles on projects leads to perceived or actual lack of fairness or recognition for outcomes.
- **Leadership styles:** Can disrupt the status quo and lead to teams feeling a loss of control or autonomy to meet the challenges. This in turn causes loss of value and or purpose of a job and is often exacerbated by the transient nature of project teams moving between projects.

If each of these issues is addressed correctly then we see a positive outcome; if not then the individual (and often the team) will inevitably head towards physical and mental collapse – burnout. Leaders should recognise these causes and ask how they can best support teams and individuals to help deliver the project more effectively.

Helping organisations to tackle burnout

- **Coaching:** The introduction of resilience coaching programmes is seen as vital tool for organisations to tackle the threat of burnout across the workforce effectively. While there is a need to increase resilience to help everyone particularly at risk, people or groups should be identified and targeted with help.
- **Awareness:** Employers must also be aware of the potential stigma around being a perfectionist and concluding that this will lead to burnout.
- **Rising stars:** Perfectionism is increasing in the young and often stems from the need to be seen as perfect – particularly on social media. This is the workforce of the future and employers must be aware that they might already be arriving in the workplace with signs of burnout.
- **Social support:** Post Covid-19 there has been less opportunity for the ‘water-cooler moment’; employers must be aware of the need to counter this missing element of support to help reduce disengagement.
- **Personal care:** People must be helped and encouraged to look after themselves by creating a balance between activity and rest and given support to build back their ‘body batteries’.
- **Psychological safety:** A window for advocating for change is vital. High performers do not like to ask for help as it requires them to admit and acknowledge that they are not performing. This trait must be acknowledged and supported.
- **Language:** Major projects organisations must be aware of the impact that the language used has on individual and team engagement. Phrases such as ‘being only as good as your last project’ can trigger unhelpful responses.
- **Awareness:** Burnout can take away many usual personality traits so noticing changes in personality and acting on that knowledge is important for managers.
- **Authenticity:** While organisations can achieve the **ISO 45003** standard as a benchmark for performance, they genuinely have to want to make a cultural change. Leaders have to start to walk the walk.

Guidance is at hand

Published in June 2021, **ISO 45003** (Occupational health and safety management – Psychological health and safety at work – Guidelines for managing psychosocial risks) sets out guidance for managing psychosocial risk.

The guidance is intended to be used in conjunction with occupational health and safety (OH&S) management systems developed under the earlier ISO 45001 and should help organisations to prevent work-related injury and ill health of their workers and other interested parties, and to promote wellbeing at work.

***'Ever tried, ever failed.
No matter. Try again.
Fail again. Fail better.'***
Samuel Beckett

***'Faith is taking
the first step even when
you don't see the whole
staircase.'***
Martin Luther King Jnr

***'Do one
thing every
day that scares
you.'***
Eleanor
Roosevelt

Brené Brown asks in Daring Greatly –
***'How many people here have avoided
doing something hard for fear of
failure?'; 'How many people admire
others who attempt to do really hard
things, even if they do fail?'***

We love to see rawness and
vulnerability in other people,
but we hate to see it in
ourselves.

Wellbeing and the major projects sector

Delivering major projects is becoming a more, not a less complicated task. While each project retains unique character traits such as deadlines and milestones, gone are the days when delivering to time and to cost are the only drivers and measures of success. Instead, today we have an increasing focus by clients, public and the entire supply chain on delivering social outcomes, on generating whole life value, on protecting biodiversity and on the need to take out carbon to create a net zero future across the whole asset life cycle.

Stakeholder engagement has never been more important. The profile of major projects in the press and in communities introduces new demands on those responsible for delivery to include expectations around social value, environmental benefits and the economic impact. As does the need to embrace the use of new digital technology and embed data gathering and analytics into the design, construction/delivery and operation in order to future-proof assets and meet the increased public service expectations.

Major project leadership must understand these changes and recognise the additional pressures they place on the delivery teams. That means creating the right supportive environment in which people can thrive and projects can succeed. It means focusing on staff wellbeing not just as the right thing to do but as an investment opportunity, a vital indicator for performance and a key to unlocking the changing delivery challenges that face us.

At an organisational level, businesses responding to commercial, contract or time pressures may transfer these pressures onto employees in the form of unrealistic expectations, unmanaged business change and a requirement for employees to master new skills or achieve some form of certification.

The increasing scale, uncertainty and complexity of major projects may place unsustainable pressure to succeed on the sponsor, the project manager or other members of the team. Poor contracting behaviour can involve clients making unrealistic demands of contractors and their subcontractors.

Covid-19 learnings: achieving life-work balance

The Covid-19 crisis has changed the way that many people work and created a fundamental and lasting shift towards greater working from home. While for some this has been welcomed, replacing the daily commute with more time spent with family, for some it has introduced new health and wellbeing problems that too often have not been managed.

Online presenteeism is a major concern, as working from home means work encroaches more into home life and challenges people to make decisions about when they should and should not be working. While setting boundaries around when work starts and finishes is important, it is also individual – some people like to have no email after 6.30pm, whereas other people prefer to work in the evening.

Leaders have to understand individual working needs and preferences and support them. They must also recognise when people are trying to prove their worth, and respond by reminding them that they are already highly valued.

As the pandemic lifts and return to the office begins, there is much to learn about the balance between life and work and the blurring of the two; getting the priorities right will be critical and must be managed down the supply chain so that teams can see the value they create and are more productive.

TIPS FOR MANAGING WORKING FROM HOME

- Include a note at the bottom of your emails to highlight your working days and hours.
- Choose times to force yourself to switch off from work completely.
- Set boundaries or use routines to limit the fuzzy edges between home and work life.
- If you are offered support, such as a dedicated work laptop or phone, take it.
- Create time-out periods without online meetings or calls.
- If possible, have a dedicated space where you work, so that you can step away from it in breaks and shut down the laptop.
- Go for daily walks or bike rides where possible.
- Create mini breaks during the day every hour or two to look out of the window – particularly if you have some green space outside you can see (this gives the task-focused part of your brain a much-needed break).

The current wellbeing situation across the major projects sector

In 2018 the Major Projects Association carried out research into wellbeing across the major projects sector. This work, as well as a survey undertaken by the mental health charity **Mind**, highlighted a range of general and sector specific issues affecting professionals across the sector, including:

- Poor mental fitness (as distinct from poor mental health) is a problem that affects all industries and is often largely invisible. This raises major challenges for major projects.
- 73% of employees surveyed by Mind had experienced poor mental health in their current job, but only half of them disclosed this to their employer.
- The Mind survey revealed that whereas 27% of employers would always go to work when experiencing poor physical health, that figure rises to 60% in the case of poor mental health.
- Research studies indicate: a negative relationship between organisational change and mental health; a higher rate of 'psychological morbidity' amongst temporary employees; the risk of an employee developing a common mental health problem can be predicted by low job control, high psychological demands and low occupational social support.
- 46% of men aged 50–54 who left construction said it was due to ill health. The average for all industries was just 25% (Department for Work and Pensions 2015).
- Project work often involves employees working away from their home and their common support networks.

The causes of poor mental health as cited by major projects professionals included:

- **Unclear or shifting vision** – makes it difficult for project managers to exercise judgement.
- **High-profile environments** – increase the stress associated with being in the public eye.
- **Time pressures** – can turn schedule milestones into unreasonable deadlines.
- **Poor contracting behaviour** – translates client requirements (however quixotic) into statute.
- **No sense of belonging** – removes the project manager's support network.
- **Reluctance to signal problems** – encourages self-destructive behaviour.

The planning and delivery of major projects and programmes inherently sees large amounts of pressure loaded on the teams as they drive to hit target dates and budgets. Unfortunately, too often we see this pressure overwhelming individuals and leading to mental health problems, including burnout.

Much of the problem stems from the change in the way that modern major projects are delivered. The use of near real-time digital systems to check and monitor progress coupled with traditional leadership styles puts pressure on teams to solve problems immediately. This too often places unrealistic performance expectations and pressure on individual professionals tasked with delivery, and leads to burnout.

While the impact of poor wellbeing and mental health considerations across the major projects sector has been known about for decades, the need to tackle this growing problem has only been discussed in the sector over the last five years.

The Association focused on the issue via a number of discussion seminars and workshops. **(Click on the titles to follow links.)**

Wellbeing throughout your major project career – Project Professional Career Stage qualities: a study

This study, undertaken by the Major Projects Association in 2018, looked at a number of key issues facing professionals across their career stages, including an analysis of their wellbeing, stress and energy – a reflection of coping mechanisms, self-leadership and resilience across:

- Energy and capacity to handle difficult scenarios and people.
- Capacity to cope with work stress and pressures. Not a measure of workload.
- Capacity to cope with personal stress and pressures. Not a measure of how much personal stress someone has.

The conclusions included:

- Capacity for good performance increased from the junior to more senior levels.
- People at all career stage showed low wellbeing, and this was worse in the junior levels.
- The Rising Stars (early careers) outranked every other group for people skills, with exceptional results.
- All groups showed weaker capacity for coping with personal stress, compared to work stress.
- If energy levels were diminished, then strategic decision-making, problem-solving and intuition were also weaker.
- There was clear development need for junior members of staff in the area of personal life resilience.

Wellbeing – the Major Projects Performance Accelerator: a seminar

This event looked at the way the major projects sector was tackling the issue of wellbeing and mental health and put a particular focus on the emerging post-Covid needs of the sector.

A number of key themes emerged as the discussion evolved including:

- Recognising the changing demands on project delivery professionals.
- Work as an enabler for health and wellbeing Covid-19 learnings; life-work balance versus work-life balance.
- Delving deeper to understand true wellbeing performance.
- Putting people at the centre of decision-making.

‘If we continue down the path we have been on it will lead to burnout and talent drain and we will not be able to achieve what we want to achieve in major project delivery. Those that can rethink their approach to better wellbeing will be successful. Those that don’t, risk failure.’ Peter Mumford, Executive Director, National Highways

‘It is about allowing people to manage their working lives better; understanding that we should not be seeking work-life balance but looking to achieve a better life-work balance.’ Nathan Baker, Chief Executive, Institute of Occupational Medicine

Wellbeing – what influences burnout in major projects?: a workshop

This workshop series was held over two short interactive sessions to focus on the way that the major projects sector can explore and influence the causes and solutions to burnout in the industry.

The workshops identified and highlighted a number of common problems and potential cures to help major project professionals manage burnout, summarised across six key areas of work:

1. Workload

The problems:

- Lack of resources
- Additional demands from stakeholders
- Unrealistic deadlines and estimates

The cures:

- Clarify prioritisation
- Develop strong empathetic teams with empathetic leadership
- Cultivate regular checking conversations and make these a measure of manager performance
- Capture actual workload rather than billed workload
- Make resource capability planning realistic by recognising downtime and efficiencies

2. Values

The problems:

- Not enough time spent developing the project purpose
- Lack of value statement to help create common culture
- Transient workforce

The cures:

- Create integrated project boards to bring senior staff from all organisations closer
- Hold team events to help mixing and interaction between parties and seniorities
- Spend dedicated time at the start of a project to help understand different drivers and cultures
- Adopt a consistent hybrid working policy across the project organisation

3. Community

The problems:

- Conflict in the supply chain due to lack of alignment
- Lack of space and time for social discussion
- The same people are used to address difficult issues

The cures:

- Create a buddy programme to create support for staff
- Encourage individuals to challenge ideas and habits
- Constantly reinforce the need to focus on breaking bad habits and behaviour
- Take 'step back' moments to review what is happening

4. Control

The problems:

- Unmanaged stakeholders
- Authority is unclear
- Expectations are unclear
- Lack of information

The cures:

- Define roles and responsibilities within the project terms of reference
- Create forums to challenge practices
- Turn tools for project health into tools for healthy projects

5. Fairness

The problems:

- Lack of support from managers
- Projected delivery cliques
- Leadership is remote

The cures:

- Provide training on project specific behaviours
- Create opportunity boards
- Initiate a confidential reporting system

6. Recognition

The problems:

- Excessive focus on transactions
- Project benefits are unclear
- Relentless focus on task completion

The cures:

- Recognise and reward positive behaviours
- Share feedback publicly
- Define when a task is complete
- Provide gratitude for actions and success

Avoiding burnout – lessons from elite sport seminar: a discussion

This session focused on understanding the causes and ways to avoid burnout in individuals by drawing parallels between the work of major projects delivery and training for elite sport.

The session was led by Manon Bradley, Development Director of the Association and World champion, World Record holding powerlifter, and Rob Coulthard, one-time member of the GB National Squad for Pentathlon and ex Modern Pentathlete, who is now Managing Director of the Judgement Index UK. Both facilitators drew on personal experience of managing burnout and offered advice on how to avoid potential negative scenarios.

Manon explained that the Covid-19 crisis and need to work from home had reduced the barriers between work and home with a home gym – accessible at all times – enabling training to take place for longer and without breaks. The result had been overtraining, the risk of ignoring warning signs of injury and the potential to quickly wipe out months of work and training.

The parallels between this overtraining and the risk of overworking while working from home during lockdown and extended periods of working in major projects were clear, and led to burnout in employees.

Rob drew on his experience of burnout in hundreds of athletes and project managers, and shared a number of crossover lessons from sport to the workplace:

- **The importance of periodisation:** Planning your training or workload in cycles of peak and off-peak is more effective than ongoing maximum effort.
- **Rotation:** Having multiple players for each key role enables greater periods for recovery – the same concept can be applied to teams in the workplace.
- **Holistic review of performance:** A perception of performance based solely on win or lose does not help to improve or progress.
- **Active rest:** Can be used to give athletes or colleagues a break without retiring them completely. For a project professional it might be to focus on a piece of research rather than being on the front line of delivery.

Effective sports coaches undertaken regular analysis of the 'total athlete' (mind, body and spirit). Effective leaders might want to consider the 'total team member'. Having a culture based on transparency, honesty and openness is critical to communication and understanding performers and teams.

Research into character traits that contribute to burnout and the way resilience can impact its severity – Hannah Melville, Glasgow University

Work at the University of Glasgow sought to provide more accurate predictors for burnout by asking a number of questions around the relationship between character traits such as perfectionism and the desire to seek higher standards, and an individual's inherent or acquired resilience.

The work is based around the premise that burnout in individuals starts from stress and develops via two stages:

1. **Exhaustion** – caused by excessive workload or reduced autonomy. Too often this fatigue is not alleviated by rest and anxiety and depression symptoms begin to overlap.
2. **Disengagement** – caused by reduced job resources.

For individuals, it is clear that burnout treatments must first target stress reduction. That requires stress being first recognised and understood by employers as a real and avoidable condition.

Why people are overworking

The rise in perfectionism is contributing to a culture of overwork and so could potentially be a major cause of burnout in the workforce. This pursuit of flawlessness, of meeting unrealistic standards, of measuring success as a pass or fail and of the need to 'seem' as well as 'be' perfect is particularly present in the young, and can be divided into two areas:

Striving for high standards and motivation to succeed. In individuals this can present as:

- The need to seek excellence
- Fear that failure reduces self-worth
- Less motivated by others' impressions
- Adaptive coping strategies
- Self-directed standards

Concerns around unrealistic goals and internalised doubt. In individuals this can present as:

- Fear of failure
- Higher critical self-evaluations
- Concerns over known achievement
- Failure avoidance as coping

Research has found that contrary to anecdotal evidence, the rise of perfectionism has no direct relationship with the increase in burnout. In fact, individuals striving for higher standards without fear of failure can uniquely protect against burnout, especially against disengagement. However, when driven by concerns, the drive to perfectionism can increase the risk of exhaustion, potentially leading to burnout.

Conclusion: higher standards without fear of failure reduces burnout risk.

Resilience as the cure for burnout

Resilience is defined as the ability of individuals to bounce back following adversity. It can be built or acquired in four main ways:

- **Outcome** – a stress inoculation creating resistance to adversity following cumulative stress exposure – the more stress we experience, the more we are used to it.
- **Personality trait** – some people have higher levels of optimism, hardiness, hope self-efficacy beliefs, positive outlook.
- **Adaptive process** – the ability to access support resource and the ability to take steps to make changes.
- **Multisystem** – a socio-environmental dynamic where we are individually and systematically influenced by different events.

Building resilience was shown to have a significant effect on reducing burnout; it is stronger than any other relationships and in particular protects individuals against disengagement and cynicism.

Conclusion: resilience benefits are stronger than perfectionism risk.

Defining a health and welfare strategy – Tideway project

The Tideway project realised early in its life that while we ‘shout safety’ across the construction sector, we ‘whisper health’. As a project, the leadership decided now was the time to apply the same rigour and strategy to health and wellbeing.

Tideway has about 80 mental health first-aiders working across projects, all of whom started on a voluntary basis – the mental health first aid course had been the most oversubscribed course that they had ever offered.

The project worked with charity **Mates in Mind** to develop a mental health maturity matrix to help evaluate its performance regarding mental health within the workplace. This was extended to main works contractors and key subcontractors and included support to produce and communicate a mental health at work plan, raise mental health awareness and encourage open conversations plus provide support to employees.

The components of the health and welfare strategy that was established at Tideway were set out as:

1. **Prevention:** Construction is a high-hazard environment in which to work, with a number of risks. Prevention is key to a health and wellbeing strategy. There is no point trying to focus on longer-term objectives for mental health, and encouraging people to lead healthier lifestyles, if we are actually making them ill in the first place through exposure to dust, noise and vibration.
2. **Basic needs:** There are fundamental things we all need in our daily lives if we are to live happily and healthily. These include levels of pay, having enough time to spend with family, feeling valued at work and having job security. In addition, basic issues such as having access to food and drinking water are vital – on a project like Tideway, with its extremely long tunnels, a 20-minute journey to get water could have a big impact.
3. **Organisational arrangements:** The culture within the organisation of caring about people, with visions and values showing how a business wants to look after staff, is vital. This includes flexible working and appreciating that staff might have responsibilities beyond their working lives.
4. **Personal support:** In construction many people work away from home, often without access to primary healthcare provision. Giving people access to the support that they need, when they need it, is crucial. The Tideway project was fortunate to have access to support on-site, including nurses, doctors and physios. One site has also invested in a relationship with a local dentist – enabling workers to see a dentist in their work time. Another site developed an app so that workers can book an appointment with a doctor or nurse anonymously.

5. **Health promotion and added-value activities:** Providing basics such as free fruit, gym access and health check-ups help people to feel cared for at work. But they will not paper over the cracks of systemic problems. In response, the Tideway project launched the Health Champions Network with at least one health champion at each of its 24 sites.

Activities have included the Health and Wellbeing Week, and one site had a visit from the charity Pursuing Independent Paths' **'Fruitful' project** which involves people with learning difficulties coming into a workplace to sell fruit juices. A number of health education sessions were held, including one offering advice on money management. Another was focused on supporting 'social eating' – creating time in people's diaries to sit down and have lunch together without phones or work-related conversation.

Work as an enabler for health and wellbeing – Institution of Occupational Health

A happy and healthy workforce is a productive one. Not only are fewer days taken off due to ill health, but the days spent at work are more productive. However, typically the major projects sector has focused on safety over health and as a result has missed a huge opportunity to look after staff better.

For example, **Health and Safety Executive** figures show that in 2019/20 there were 40 fatalities in construction – half of which were from falls from height. In comparison there were 8,000 occupational cancer deaths through the construction industry. Across industry, since 2014 the UK has on average lost, per employee, 30 days of productivity due to ill health, about half of which is due to stress anxiety and depression, and shows the negative impact that health has on productivity.

Key causes of ill health are:

1. Job and workplace-related health problems
2. Personal issues creating physical and mental health problems
3. Physical characteristics causing illness

Clearly, while it is not possible to manage every aspect of peoples' lives, there are things that can be done within jobs and the workplace to help improve health and wellbeing and so enable people to become more productive.

'We continue to miss an opportunity – the workplace is a great place for us to control health and welfare – to help people access healthcare and advice and to live healthier lives in the workplace and beyond.' Nathan Baker, Chief Executive, Institute of Occupational Medicine

Putting people at the centre of decision-making on the A14 – National Highways

For major projects to truly focus on the wellbeing of people working on them, it requires a culture change to put people at the centre of decisions. This means leaders must question what staff and supply chains really need to do their job properly while feeling safe and rewarded. Showing authenticity and vulnerability is crucial throughout this conversation.

With an estimated 47% of absence currently due to stress and mental health, investment to focus on people and to put them at the centre of organisational decisions is a clear way to boost productivity and which, if it is genuine and done well, can be central to a project's success.

For example, the value of people was particularly important at Highways England (now **National Highways**) during the Covid-19 pandemic when staff were being asked to work long hours in often vulnerable public-facing positions. To recognise this commitment and reinforce people as the heart of the organisation, the leadership sent letters to the children of staff to thank them and explain why their parents were so valuable to the community.

Other initiatives at National Highways, such as the Buddies scheme, helped teams build and focus on resilience, and the Heroes recognition scheme rewarded those who really stepped up during the crisis. These simple initiatives underlined staff importance and as a result, staff engagement improved by 13% and reduced absence due to mental health and wellbeing by 12%.

'Leadership visibility is important. Some people aren't comfortable showing their feelings but that's what creates relationships.' Laura Baker, Head of Customer Service, National Highways

Mental Resilience Training – the British Army

British Army personnel typically face highly traumatic situations when serving on active duty. For this reason there is an increasing focus on building resilience and managing 'mental fitness'.

A distinction is made between 'mental fitness' and 'mental health'. Good leadership is absolutely critical to sustaining mental fitness of teams. Maintaining mental health and managing mental illness, on the other hand, is a responsibility of the healthcare community.

Soldiers suffer from 'bottling up' feeling and are less likely to seek help post trauma due to not wanting to let mates down – putting up with more physical and mental pressure than a person would in ordinary civilian situations. The 'Don't Bottle It Up' programme has been around and refreshed over a number of years to try to tackle this problem.

However, more recently it has switched focus to also build the mental resilience of personnel. The theory is that those who feel adequately prepared through education and training are less likely to show mental ill-health symptoms.

A programme called **Mental Resilience Training** (MRT) has been developed and implemented by the British Army's School of Infantry to start to build mental resilience early. This starts during basic training for new recruits, helping them build their resilience and mental fitness as they build their physical fitness.

Using the concepts of sports psychology, the programme aims to get across to the recruits that physical fitness and physical exercise will build their muscular strength. The mind is a muscle and needs to be exercised to keep it fit.

'Mental fitness is the responsibility of the leadership chain.' Brigadier Tim Hodgetts CBE, Senior Health Adviser, British Army

Switch off campaign – National Grid

The 'Switch off' campaign, was launched by asset manager **National Grid** as part of a review of its approach to staff wellbeing. Not only was sickness absence costing around £30 million a year but the business was also aware that staff 'presenteeism' causes great harm to many, and probably costs several times that figure over the long term.

Faced with this realisation, National Grid set about creating the conditions that fostered a sustainable culture to support wellbeing, performance and morale across the business. That meant carrying out an annual organisational stress risk assessment and putting in place programmes to ensure that leaders and managers are equipped to look after their employees.

'Switch off' is one of three wellbeing principles, the other two being: 'Be Active' and 'Refuel'. It encourages people to be responsible around the use of devices and switch them off and go for a walk after extended periods of use. The campaign is driven down from the top, with leaders pledging not to send messages very early in the morning or very late at night and expecting a response.

In parallel, leaders are all put through Mental Health First Aid training and encouraged as part of the programme to talk to staff about any mental health problems or challenges. A suite of occupational health services is available to support this process.

What action can an employer take to boost wellbeing?

– Mind

1. The employers' wellbeing journey

Most organisations go on a 'journey' that has five key steps, as shown below:

1. Start off by raising awareness, and talking about this issue; many organisations are doing that.
2. Make a commitment – using something like the **Time to Change Employer Pledge**. Around 850–900 employers have already done this.
3. Audit your practice – what are you doing well? Where do you sit in relation to other organisations?
4. Use that audit to improve your work.
5. Continue to monitor your best practice when it comes to wellbeing in the workplace.

2. The mental health core standards

Six basic things that every organisation can do easily:

1. Produce, implement and communicate a mental health at work plan that promotes the good mental health of all employees and outlines the support available for those who may need it.
2. Develop mental health awareness among employees by making information, tools and support accessible.
3. Encourage open conversations about mental health and the support available when employees are struggling. During the recruitment process and at regular intervals throughout employment, offer appropriate workplace adjustments to employees who require them.
4. Provide your employees with good working conditions; ensure they have a healthy work-life balance and opportunities for development.
5. Promote effective people management.
6. Routinely monitor employee mental health and wellbeing by understanding available data, talking to employees and understanding risk factors.

3. The mental health enhanced standards

Large employers and the public sector can and should go further, demonstrating best practice through external reporting and designated leadership responsibility. Below are four enhanced standards:

1. Increase transparency and accountability through internal and external reporting, to include a leadership commitment and outline of the organisation's approach to mental health.
2. Demonstrate accountability by nominating a health and wellbeing lead at board or senior leadership level, with clear reporting duties and responsibilities.
3. Improve the disclosure process to encourage openness during recruitment and throughout, ensuring employees are aware of why the information is needed and making sure the right support is in place to facilitate a good employer response following disclosure.
4. Ensure provision of tailored in-house mental health support and signposting to clinical help, including digital support, employer-purchased occupational health or employee assistance programme.

***'The mind
is everything.
What you think,
you become.'***

Buddha

***'What a wonderful life I've had!
I only wish I'd realised it
sooner.'***

Gabrielle Colette
(most successful French
woman writer ever)

***'If you can dream it,
you can do it.'***

Walt Disney

***'You will always
find the evidence
for what you
choose to believe.'***

InQ Poet

***'We
speak our
lives into
existence.'***

Jay Z, rapper

***'Day by day, what you
choose, what you think and
what you do is who you become.'***

Heraclitus pre-Socratic Ionian
Greek philosopher

***'The more you praise
and celebrate your life,
the more there is to
celebrate.'***

Oprah Winfrey

Building Mental Health

Building Mental Health is an initiative led by industry experts, providing support and advice to increase awareness of mental health in all parts of the construction sector.

The organisation's goal is to:

- Encourage the industry to engage and embrace the mental health agenda.
- Make best practice and information readily and wherever possible freely available.
- Ensure that the industry takes a huge leap forward to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health by getting the conversation started while educating as many as possible where and when to seek help.

With support from industry charity the **Lighthouse Club**, the **Construction Industry Training Board** (CITB) and **Mental Health at Work**, Building Mental Health has developed five simple steps and resources to help construction industry businesses achieve a better mental health culture in their organisation:

1. Sign the **Building Mental Health Charter**.
2. Order a **Helpline Pack** and promote the free 24/7 Construction Industry Helpline to your colleagues.
3. Deliver a '**Tool Box Talk**' about mental health and wellbeing in your workplace.
4. Offer employees who manage people the opportunity to complete **Mental Health First Aid training**.
5. Ensure you have enough Mental Health First Aiders trained for your workplace (recommended 1 per 100 employees).

Further information about these steps, and resources to support the journey can be found on the **Building Mental Health website**.

Construction Industry Training Board

Research by the CITB has highlighted the scale of the mental health challenge facing industry. It points to the factors driving poor wellbeing across the sector that are now increasingly impacting the creation of a healthier, happier environment that is vital to attracting new people, improving productivity and enhancing construction's reputation post Covid-19.

The report emphasises that coordinated leadership from the **Construction Leadership Council** (CLC), supported by the CITB, is required to improve mental health in construction. Work is needed urgently to boost the number of employers taking positive action to improve the wellbeing of employees.

The work highlights a number of successful industry-led programmes that are working to improve mental health and wellbeing in the sector, but points to three key areas that are needed to accelerate change:

1. **Coordinated leadership:** 'The CLC (Construction Leadership Council) identified the potential benefits of achieving industry-wide improvement and listed it in their recovery plan. CITB will work closely with the CLC, which has the support of industry and Government in England, in leading a modern approach to tackling mental health and wellbeing issues.'
2. **Learning from new initiatives and past mistakes:** 'Sharing what is working is essential for success. New initiatives must focus on prevention before crisis. Construction is a people industry and personal connections are vital for improving wellbeing.'
3. **The need for a dashboard and a wellbeing and resilience hub:** 'A major highlight from this research is the need for a unifying mental health and wellbeing dashboard, a tool that could assess issues like anxiety, depression, fatigue and stress.'

The report concludes that while there is good work going on across the industry it is vital that more is done to support mental health and wellbeing and help transform the sector. 'Get it right and industry working conditions will improve, construction can thrive and lives will be improved and saved.'

Mates in Mind

Mates in Mind is a UK charity focused on raising awareness and addressing the stigma of poor mental health by promoting and leading the development of positive mental wellbeing within the workplace.

The charity works across industries, focusing on construction, as well as related sectors such as transport, logistics and manufacturing, working in partnership to recognise that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work for everyone. The aim is to 'break the silence surrounding mental ill health, while generating awareness and understanding to further promote cultures of positive wellbeing.'

The charity uses a three-stage approach to help organisations on their journey to develop strategies and programmes to boost mental health and wellbeing in the workplace.

1. **Getting Started:** 'As an organisation, you recognise the importance of workplace mental health and wellbeing and need a little help getting started.'

Actions include:

- » Helping to establish your mental health plan.
- » Helping communicate your commitment.
- » Developing your mental health policy.
- » Training your staff in general mental health awareness.
- » Understanding the impact of your interventions and how to measure it.

2. **Developing:** 'Building on existing awareness and looking to strengthen your mental health strategy.'

Actions include:

- » Building upon any existing plans and awareness.
- » Refreshing mental health/stress management policies.
- » Providing people managers with skills and confidence to listen to and support their staff.
- » Improving engagement with your workforce through a range of tailored materials, for example, toolbox talks, posters, awareness days resources packs.
- » Enhancing reporting and sharing of impact.

3. **Leading the way:** 'Sustaining a measurable mental health strategy and looking to do more.'

Actions include:

- » Providing measures to refresh your commitment to the mental health of your wider workforce.
- » Ensuring consistency in application across your wider people-related policies and procedures.
- » Benchmarking your management of mental health against established standards.
- » Ensuring appropriate education and awareness programmes across your workforce, promoting environments for good mental health.
- » Strengthening your data management and reporting.

Mates in Mind works alongside employers to create their ideal environment, building upon any existing programmes and provisions that are already in place so as to accelerate the business towards a healthier more productive culture.

***'Almost every single thing
will work again if you
unplug it for a few minutes,
including you.'***

Anne Lammo

***'You are the sky.
Everything else – it's just
the weather.'***

Pema Chodro

***'There is no path;
the path is made by
walking.'***

Antonio Machado,
Spanish poet

***'If you don't become
the ocean, you'll be
seasick every day.'***

Leonard Cohen

APM – the wellbeing of project professionals

Project professionals work in a stressful environment. **Research** by the Association for Project Management (APM) aimed to reflect how this work nature affects the state of wellbeing and proposes solutions and recommendations to improve the situation.

This study was conducted during autumn and winter 2018/19. Based on the findings, four organisational level interventions were suggested which can be used to improve wellbeing, and two at individual levels.

Organisational level interventions:

- **Strategy** – through cultivating a positive culture, implementing a Project Management Office (PMO) and developing supportive corporate policies.
- **Operational planning** – by integrating project management techniques into operational planning, active job design and creating consistent strategic communications programme.
- **Execution** – through constructive performance management and feedback along with supporting dynamic resource management.
- **Continuity and growth** – by building a strategic training programme, active staff development through supporting obtaining relevant qualifications and participation in professional bodies such as APM in addition to developing different career tracks.

Individual level interventions:

- **Active management of stress** – through time management, stress management and energy management.
- **Adoption of a strengths-based approach.**

Additional tools and resources

(Click on the titles to follow links.)

Mind Workplace Wellbeing Index

The Mind Workplace Wellbeing Index is a benchmark of best policy and practice. It will help you find out where you are doing well and where you could improve your approach to mental health in the workplace.

This benchmark of policy and practice underlines that valued and supported staff are far more likely to deliver the best outcomes for businesses. The scheme helps organisations to benchmark their wellbeing performance against other similar organisations and find out where they could improve their approach to mental health in the workplace. This will ensure that staff needs are core to the organisation.

Taking part in the Index enables an organisation to:

- Gain public recognition of your organisation's commitment to workplace wellbeing.
- Share and access best practice learning from other employers participating in the Index.
- Find out what your employees really feel about how you support their mental health.

Mind Mental Health and Work Gateway

This online platform provides the resources, training and information people need to make their life better at work for themselves, their colleagues and their staff.

Timewise – a flexible approach to hybrid working

Timewise is a consultancy helping employers to design flexible working solutions that help to attract talented, loyal people and create fair workplaces.

Building up wellbeing in construction

This 2017 article from Raconteur is a great way to open the conversation on wellbeing in any construction-related business.

Major Projects Association knowledge repository resources on wellbeing

Insight, policy and documentation generated across a variety of major projects.

Managing health at work – Health and Safety Executive 2005

Recording and monitoring information on sickness absence including work relatedness.

Employee wellbeing measurement and metric – Business in the Community

(This tool is only available to BITC members.)

This three-part series is intended to support organisations seeking to improve their approach to measurement of employee health, wellbeing and engagement.

- Guide 1: Getting Started
- Guide 2: Deepening Your Insights
- Guide 3: Wellbeing Charters, Frameworks, Standards, and Benchmarks

Further resources

Title	Author	Type	Topics / themes
<i>Positive Intelligence</i>	Shirzad Chamine	Book/exercises	Draws on neuroscience & positive psychology to offer simple framework to build better mental fitness, with exercises to improve mental fitness, for better wellbeing, relationships and life fulfilment in general. Includes some self-diagnosis exercises (also accessible without book): Positive Intelligence assessment – how mentally fit you are: here Identifying your ‘saboteurs’: inner voices that work against us and how we self-sabotage: here . Also, Stanford TED Talk: here
<i>Daring Greatly</i>	Brené Brown	Book/TED Talk/Film	On the power of vulnerability and being our authentic, courageous selves: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way we Live, Love, Parent and Lead. Ted Talk: here . Netflix <i>The Call to Courage</i> : here

<i>Dare to Lead</i>	Brené Brown	Book/website/ podcast	As above + how to lead mindfully with courage, authenticity, passion and heart. Website: here . With podcasts, assessments and other useful leadership resources
<i>Self-compassion</i>	Kristin Neff	Book/website/ podcast	The power of self-compassion: here
<i>Emotional Courage</i>	Susan David	Article/podcast	The importance of self-compassion, accepting our emotions and being kinder to ourselves. TED Talk and article: here
Resilient Leadership	Narayan Pant (INSEAD Professor)	Website	Neuroscience and positive psychology- based exercises.
<i>Authenticity at Work</i>	INSEAD article	Article	The advantages of being authentic at work: here
<i>Give yourself a Break</i>	HBR	Article	The power of self-compassion at work: here
<i>Improving work through better relationships</i>	McKinsey	Article	The boss factor: Making the world a better place through workplace relationships: here
Dan Pink Drive	Dan Pink	TED Talk	Motivation, leadership, incentives: here
How to be Brilliant every single day	Alan Watkins	TED Talk	Neuroscience and effects of stress: here
<i>Psychology of wellbeing</i>	Positive Psychology	Article	Neuroplasticity: Healthy Shortcuts to a Happier Life: here
<i>How to turn everyday stress into 'optimal stress'</i>	McKinsey	Article	How to turn stress into something useful and manage it: here
<i>Help your employees find purpose -- or watch them leave</i>	McKinsey	Article	The importance of purpose at work and how to tap into it: here

Wellbeing	Major Projects Association	Full report and Highlights report from 2018 seminar	Lessons from different high-stress organisations which have used a variety of techniques to manage their projects in ways which minimise the negative impact upon their teams: here
Wellbeing – the major projects performance accelerator	Major Projects Association	Highlights report from 2021 seminar	Discussion of how major projects can use wellbeing of teams to improve project performance: here
Avoiding burnout – lessons from elite sport	Major Projects Association	Blog following 2021 event	Perspectives on burnout from two international athletes and how this mirrors what is happening in major projects: here
Making sense of wellbeing	Major Projects Association	Knowledge campaign	A collection of resources related to major projects and wellbeing held with the Knowledge Repository: here
Wellbeing resources	Major Projects Association	Collection of resources	Additional resources held within the Knowledge Repository: here
Predicting burnout	Hannah S. Melville; Dr Carolina Kuepper-Tetzl	PhD thesis	Exploration of how perfectionism and culture combine to predict burnout in working adults: here

Wellbeing in Major Projects

Study Report

more > [Major Projects Association resources](#)

more > [Major Projects Association events](#)

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