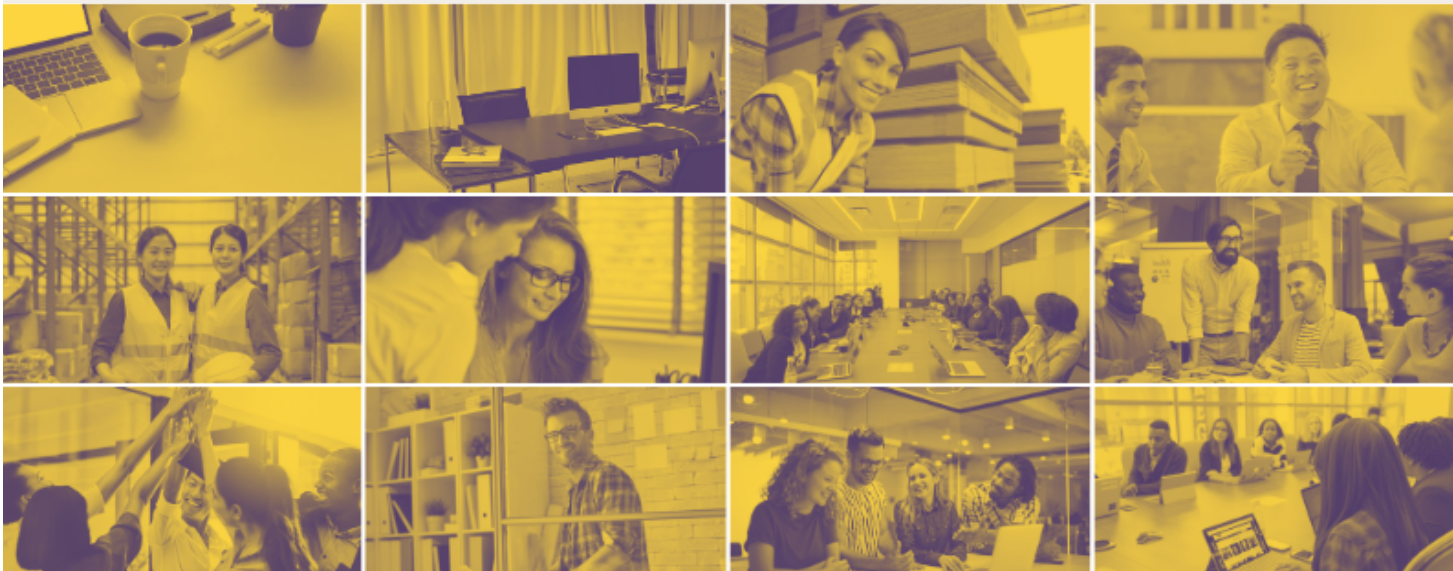


UMBRELLA®

# Navigating workload and wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand

UMBRELLA WELLBEING REPORT | MAY 2023



# Table of Contents

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01 Introduction	3
02 A snapshot of the numbers	5
03 Our insights	6
04 When work becomes “too much” or “not enough”	7
05 Legal obligations	8
06 The Great Reprioritisation	9
07 Spotlight on burnout	11
08 Managing employee workloads	13
09 Balancing high workloads while promoting workplace wellbeing	15
10 Final thoughts	17

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# 01 Introduction

**In this Umbrella Wellbeing Report, we examine workloads in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the impact too much work—and too little—can have on wellbeing and organisational outcomes.**

We analysed information gathered from thousands of users of the Umbrella Wellbeing Assessment to provide business leaders and decision-makers with a snapshot of how New Zealanders perceive their work, their workloads, and their wellbeing, and offer insights to create mentally healthy workplaces.

The old adage says, **"If you want something done, ask a busy person."** While there's a lot of truth in that—insofar as, often, the busier we are, the better we are at managing our time—there can also be repercussions for the individual and the workplace when we pile workloads too high.

What's important, and what this report aims to address, is how to work towards realistic workloads, and healthy work patterns, with the end goal being that everyone is producing better work as a result. It's also vital to recognise that how one person approaches their work and what resources they need will be different to the next.

Balancing employee workloads with business goals to achieve a healthy workplace can be challenging and if it sounds difficult, that's because it is.

Yet, drawing on decades of experience working with organisations, and countless research articles, our researchers and psychologists know that, although tough, this is one challenge that is too important not to meet.

When we talk about workload in this report, we are referring to the amount of work that is required to get the job done. Many of us are likely to think about workload that is too high, but we shouldn't ignore the other side of workload. When there is too little to do, or workloads are unpredictable or unclear, this can also negatively impact on job satisfaction and mental wellbeing, and compromise performance.

**From the information we gathered from more than 7,000 working New Zealanders who took part in our Wellbeing Assessment in 2022, we found:**

- 14% feel pressured to work long hours
- 43% have to neglect some of their work tasks because they have too much to do
- 44% work very intensively to meet work deadlines.

In addition, New Zealanders who reported having high workloads have two times greater odds of experiencing high levels of psychological distress and three times greater odds of intending to leave their jobs in the next 6 months.

**So, what do these numbers mean for business leaders and decision-makers?**



The term “**quiet quitting**”, popularised in 2022, might come to mind as we examine the consequences of workload. Like many trends, this one first started on social media and captures a so-called pattern of behaviour where employees are not outright quitting their jobs but, rather, quitting the idea of going above and beyond their contracted duties. The mere introduction of this phrase suggests our employees are increasingly understanding the impact on their wellbeing when workloads become a long-term problem. Although the use of the term is reportedly on the decline, the sentiment behind it is still very much here to stay.

The team at Umbrella tends to favour the phrase “**the Great Reprioritisation**” over quiet quitting because it removes any inference of resignation. Instead, it reflects that people—both employees and business owners—are re-evaluating how work fits into their lives to strengthen, not sacrifice, wellbeing. In this report we will delve deeper into this interplay between workload and wellbeing and why it’s unhelpful to view high performance and wellbeing as mutually exclusive.

**Because workload is one of the key determinants of workplace wellbeing, achieving a healthy workplace is not possible if overwork, and underwork, are not properly addressed.**

*The Umbrella Wellbeing Assessment can help your organisation assess and understand workload and wellbeing. To find out more about our Wellbeing Assessment tool or other ways we can help you enhance your wellbeing leadership and organisational capacity to support healthy work, contact us*

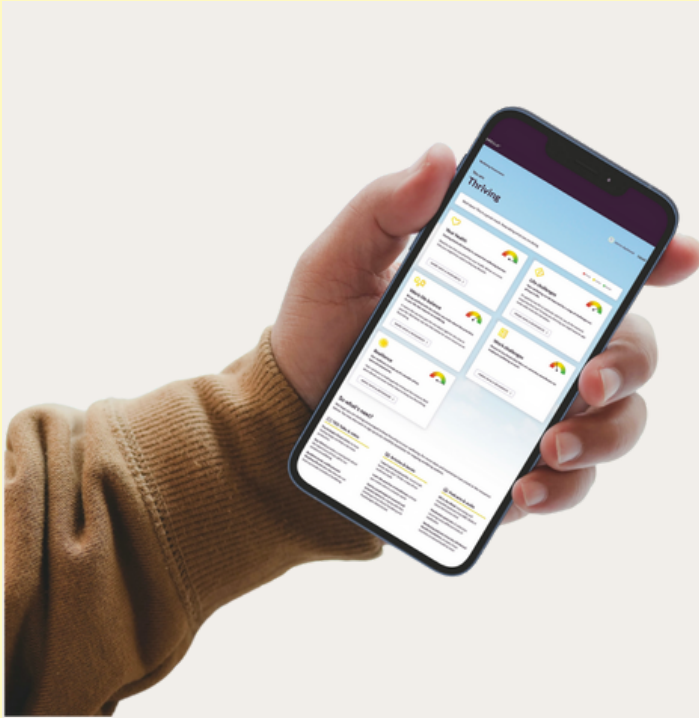
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## In this report, we explore:

- employers’ legal obligations when it comes to workload
- consequences of high workload, with a spotlight on burnout
- how to manage healthy rhythms within teams
- what organisations and managers can do to plan and distribute workload more effectively to reduce employee burden
- ways to encourage breaks, not burnout, by proactively balancing challenge with recovery.

## 02 A snapshot of the numbers

Powered by more than 7,000 users of the Umbrella Wellbeing Assessment



14% 

Of working New Zealanders feel **pressured to work long hours at work**

43%

Of working New Zealanders have to **neglect some of their work tasks because they have too much to do**

44%

Of working New Zealanders have to **work very intensively to meet work deadlines**

New Zealanders with high workload have...


2x

The odds of experiencing **high levels of psychological distress**

3x

The odds of **intending to leave their job in the next 6 months**

*Compared with those who do not report high workload*

 Compared to 2021 data (14% vs 10%)

All data collected during 2022 from working New Zealanders (N=7597) in varied organisations and industries (e.g., healthcare, utilities, construction and manufacturing, administration and retail). Respondents were 61% female, 33% male, 6% gender diverse. Ages ranged from under 20 years to over 65. The majority of respondents were New Zealand European (58%), Māori (20%) or Pacific peoples (Fijian, Samoan, Cook Island Māori, Tongan or Niuean: 9%).

## 03 Our insights

### So what do these numbers tell us?

The numbers tell a story, especially when you link them to the research published in 2021 by the World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization, which found that people who work long hours (55 hours or more per week) are at heightened risk of heart disease and stroke, compared to those who work “normal” hours (35–40 hours) per week.

**It is estimated that nearly 1 in 10 adults globally work these long hours, contributing to more than three-quarters of a million deaths annually.**

While many New Zealanders might not think this is them, on average Kiwis work longer hours compared to workers in other OECD countries. Consequently, our rates of workload-induced deaths from stroke or heart disease come in higher than those of many other Western countries, including Australia, UK, USA and Canada.

There are at least two possible reasons why overworking might lead to such adverse health outcomes:

1. First, the more we work, the more likely it is that our physiological stress response is activated, triggering harmful changes throughout our bodies when this stress is ongoing (not least including heightened blood pressure and the formation of fat deposits in our arteries).
2. Second, people who work longer hours are more likely to adopt unhealthy behavioural responses to this heightened stress—including substance use, bad eating habits, lack of exercise, and disrupted sleep—all of which are also risk factors for illness and disease.

When we consider how common high workload is (14% of employees feel pressured to work long hours) and the impact this has on our people and our organisations, we are faced with a sobering question: “How much longer can we accept this risk, and normalise its consequences in our workplaces, and in our society?”

From our extensive work with individuals and organisations, we know that workload on its own is not necessarily the problem. People generally thrive with some degree of challenge and engagement in their working lives, and “working hard” is key to keeping our workplaces strong and growing. However, “working hard” is not the same as overwork and should not come at the expense of wellbeing.

**Endless studies show that good wellbeing enhances performance, which means that getting the workload balance right is what’s good for our people as well as our organisations.**

The following pages of this report outline our expert recommendations on what to do about the workload and wellbeing challenge—and how we can collectively build healthier workplaces.



## 04 When does work become "too much" or "not enough"?

**Too much to do and not enough time?**

**Or too much time on your hands with not enough work to do?**

It's not just business leaders and decision-makers who feel this way in the workplace; up to half of employees report similar experiences, according to Umbrella Wellbeing Assessment data. As already noted:

**43% of working New Zealanders feel they have to neglect some of their work tasks because they have too much to do and not enough time to do it and 44% feel they have to work very intensively to meet work deadlines.**



Continued overwork takes a toll on wellbeing. Workload, especially overwork, can cause stress, frustration, overwhelm, and often leads to burnout, poor mental and physical health outcomes, and reduced job performance.

Peer-reviewed research from 2022 found that high job demands, low control at work and job insecurity were key determinants of burnout. Interestingly, a survey conducted by Gallup found that *how people experience their workload* had a stronger influence on burnout than the number of hours they worked.

**Workload becomes a problem when:**

- unreasonable or multiple deadlines are imposed
- staff shortages result in increased workload and pressures
- insufficient resources are available to manage excessive workloads.

**The other side of overwork is underwork**

When workload is too low, boredom can take over, which then negatively affects job satisfaction and mental wellbeing. Unpredictable workload—seesawing between high pressure and clock-watching—also makes people dissatisfied and unwell.



## 05 Legal obligations

We asked employment lawyer, Caro Rieger from Black Door Law, to explain what an employer's legal obligations are in relation to managing employee workload.

**Overwork that leads to burnout or heightened stress levels in a workplace could be an indicator an employer is not meeting their obligations. Although working above and beyond contracted hours is a reality for some, this practice can create legal risks for employers who enable employees to work increased hours without putting supports in place.**

A number of legal obligations come into play when it comes to increased work hours. Employers have a duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 to ensure (so far as is reasonably practicable) the health and safety of their workers. This includes the obligation to protect against physical harm (including fatigue) as well as psychological harm.



**Caro Rieger**  
Employment Lawyer, Black Door Law

### **Employers' health and safety obligations extend to employees who work from home.**

With employees being more available due to technology and the increased numbers of employees working remotely, there is a greater blurring of the lines between work and home. While technology and working from home offers flexibility, when not appropriately managed, it can lead to overwork and increased stress levels. Employers should be mindful of this and put plans in place to safeguard the health and safety of their employees. In addition to their Health and Safety obligations, employers must also provide a range of minimum working conditions, as dictated by various pieces of legislation.

### **Employers' obligations include, for example:**

- ensuring staff are paid at least the minimum wage for every hour worked;
- offering reasonable consideration for requiring an employee to be available to work additional hours/overtime; and
- allowing adequate rest and meal breaks to be taken.

Where employees are salaried and are earning close to minimum wage for their contracted hours (if you divide the weekly or fortnightly salary by the number of hours worked), they can very quickly start earning less than minimum wage if working beyond those hours.

A breach of any of these obligations can lead to employers being required to pay penalties, fines or having to retrospectively pay staff in line with their minimum entitlements (or all three!).

To mitigate the risk of breaching minimum entitlements, employers should be taking the time to design roles appropriately, sharing responsibility across staff members and consistently monitoring working hours and employee wellbeing.

### **Some practical things employers can do in this regard are:**

- When employees are required to fill in timesheets, review any increase in hours.
- Be conscious of employees earning close to minimum wage and ensure that any work over and above contracted hours results in a "top-up" to their salary to comply with minimum wage obligations.
- Use technology to provide reports on who is accessing the server or sending emails outside of work hours and monitor if there are any trends with employees regularly working long hours.
- Use the above information to put a plan in place.



## 06 The Great Reprioritisation

What we are calling the “Great Reprioritisation” refers to people shifting from seeing work as the centre of everything towards considering what else there is in their lives of value and meaning. They can then figure out how they want to spend time so it’s more aligned with what’s important to them.

This echoes the “work-life balance” idea, and a significant volume of research now supports the importance of that balance. The research covers a wide range of topics, including the impact of workload on mental and physical health, relationships, and overall life satisfaction.

When we talk about reprioritisation, we’re referring to the process of discovering ways of achieving a healthy balance between what we do for work, and everything else in our lives that is of value to us. Importantly, it’s OK to work hard, but being overworked to the point of near overwhelm and burnout, is not good for anyone.

What we do know, and this is why the concept of the Great Reprioritisation is important, is that figuring out the value we put on all elements of our lives, including work, can lead to improved physical and mental health, better relationships and greater job satisfaction and productivity.

Also, it’s really “workload”, not simply “work”, that needs to be balanced with the rest of life. Workload refers to the amount of work that needs to be done within a certain timeframe, and varies depending on the person, the nature of the work, and the environment. It’s also influenced by factors such as stress, fatigue, and mental and physical health. If we’re recovering from a broken leg, our workload will need to be adjusted. We might love our jobs, but when the workload shoots up, stopping us getting home in time for the family, or blocking our commitment to physical wellbeing or community involvement, that starts to take a toll. It’s important workload is managed effectively to achieve good, healthy balance.

Research published in 2021 by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that **people around the world who work long hours** (defined as at least 55 hours per week) **are at heightened risk of heart disease and stroke compared to those who work standard hours (35-40 hours per week).**

Nearly one in 10 adults globally are estimated to be working these long hours, contributing to approximately three quarters of a million deaths annually (according to data collected in 2016).



## An example of overwork in practice:

Mary works for an organisation which is undergoing a restructure. Feeling enthusiastic about the company's future, Mary volunteered to be a change champion, so, in addition to her usual work, she's also taking on a substantial amount of change communication work.

What this means for Mary, day-to-day, is that her workload has increased (because she is only one of a few people who can answer questions related to the change). Because she doesn't know what's coming up and what she'll need to be doing, it is also highly unpredictable. Over the last week, Mary had more than 100 anxious employees come to her asking about the restructuring and its impact on them.

The extra work isn't the issue, the problem is that Mary lacks the support and resources she needs to help her manage the enquiries she's getting from other employees. So, despite putting her hand up to help, Mary is now feeling overwhelmed and stressed and this is affecting her entire being. She has started working longer hours, staying in the office until late, her sleep is disrupted, and she often misses reading bedtime stories and tucking her son into bed because of the demands on her regular workload and feelings of overwhelm about navigating the restructure.



You or your employees might relate to Mary's situation or feelings of overwhelm. Fortunately, there are ways around this.

As individuals, we can tap into our inner resilience by developing our coping skills to manage stress more effectively.

As teams, we can all take a role in managing each other's wellbeing by having conversations and having them early enough so that they matter. As an example, in our Umbrella team meetings, we often start by checking in with everyone in the room and asking where they sit on the "thriving to overwhelmed to burnout" continuum. If they're in the overwhelmed section, which can be a danger zone, we have a conversation to ask whether something can be taken off their plate, or if they need extra support to get them back to thriving.



If you're an organisation interested in expanding your team's resilience skills, explore our training workshops run by our expert psychologists.

**This isn't the only solution though, of course, and oftentimes it fails to treat the root cause of the problem: the workload itself, or the workplace culture that wraps around it.**



## 07 Spotlight on burnout



Professor Jarrod Haar  
Ngāti Maniapoto; Ngāti Mahuta

We asked highly regarded researcher and commentator, and Professor of Management and Māori Business at Massey University, Professor Jarrod Haar (Ngāti Maniapoto; Ngāti Mahuta) for his views on how Aotearoa New Zealand is performing and his advice on managing burnout.

Those who are at high burnout risk are more likely to have lower job satisfaction and low job performance, have higher mental health issues (job anxiety and depression) and be more likely to quit.

A study I did at the end of 2021 showed that NZ workers needed to improve at identifying whether they were burnt out—only 11% of those who were burnt out (from my survey analysis) thought they were. So, most people need help identifying whether they are at risk of burnout.

### There are four dimensions associated with job burnout:

<b>Exhaustion</b>	Emotionally and physically. For example, even after having a break, you still feel the “tank is empty”.
<b>Mental Distancing</b>	Doubting the significance of what you do. This might include giving your all and wondering why you bother!
<b>Emotional Impairment</b>	You can't control your emotions at work - whether sadness (e.g., tears) or anger.
<b>Cognitive Impairment</b>	Your brain doesn't function as it should. This might look like forgetting things regularly, even simple things.

People who are high across all these dimensions (and, yes, exhaustion typically dominates) are at higher risk of burning out, as well as experiencing low job satisfaction, low job performance, and higher job anxiety and depression. These people are also more likely to quit their job.

*"Consider yourself as a battery on your phone. You need quality time to recharge. If the “recharging” isn't working, then you need to change things up massively—and yes, even changing jobs! But, if that gives you more time with your family, then that might improve your life massively."*





## Risk

Interestingly, December 2022 data from the New Zealand workforce showed that our burnout risk rate is at 18%—i.e., just under one in five people! Ideally, the burnout rate should be fewer than one in 20.

So, we have some work to do and it starts with taking care of our workforce and being on alert for key risks:

### Vulnerable groups:

- Managers (all that responsibility!)
- Young workers (under 30 years)
- Professionals (knowledge workers)

### Risky working conditions:

- Long work hours
- After-hours work at home on smart devices
- Conflict between work and family roles
- Feeling lonely and not having social connections at work
- Poor workplace culture (i.e., toxic)



**Professor Jarrod Haar**  
Ngāti Maniapoto; Ngāti Mahuta

*"No" is OK. Inquire and prompt co-workers, team members, or fellow leaders who are displaying tiredness, changing emotions, or visibly working longer hours. Take care and look out for key risk areas. Tell your team it's OK to turn off their technology at home (i.e., working after-hours). Encourage them to get out into nature and socialise more."*





## 08 Managing employee workloads

Clearly, managing our employees' workloads is vital to a healthy and productive workplace. The volume of work each individual can take on varies, and because the nature of the work is not always the same, it's not only important to choose the right person for the job, but also to avoid overburdening any one employee (or under-utilising them).

Here are some of the ways we suggest managing your employees' workloads:

### 1 Know how to spot signs of overload and underload in your team.

To do this, we must check in with employees often. This may look like holding weekly one-on-ones or group discussions with your team. Asking your people directly what form of support they desire is key to ensuring they are comfortable speaking up.

**Common warning signs to look out for include:**

- working consistently longer hours e.g., early mornings, nights and weekends
- poorer productivity, performance, and more frequent errors
- change in employees' attitudes
- low motivation or energy to do tasks they were once motivated to do
- isolation or withdrawal.

### 2 Review, communicate and set clear priorities.

As a leader, figuring out your team members' workloads and current capacity is vital for reviewing what tasks are a priority, and what tasks or projects you can postpone for later.

Instead of overburdening your team, try to pare back less impactful work, streamline time-consuming tasks or clearly communicate deadlines based on organisational priorities. Are there also employees who are under-engaged and could be encouraged to take on new challenges? You may want to consider whether you, or the managers you support, require additional training to do this well.

### 3 Enhance your human resource practices.

Try implementing organisational interventions such as employee participation in the planning of tasks, new protocols, task restructuring and training. Each of these activities has been found to improve job demands and resources, which also reduces job strain and exhaustion, on the one hand, or underemployment on the other.





4

## Encourage oscillation between work and recovery.

Oscillation at work is the cycling between periods of high activity (e.g., busy work) and periods of recovery during the workday. Leaders can model this behaviour by engaging in micro-breaks, such as telling your team you're taking a quick walk around the block.

This is important, as research has found that when there is modelling and support for recovery, this enhances the effect of micro-break activities on workplace wellbeing. Some examples of micro-break activities include: socialising with colleagues, connecting with significant others, surfing the internet, and getting up for a snack or drink.

5

## Promote autonomy in the workplace.

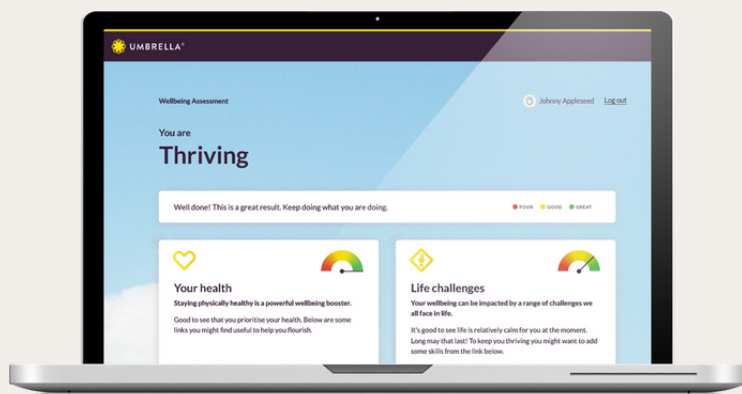
If we are given the authority and freedom to choose how, when, and where to perform our work—therefore pairing our work demands to the times of day, and places, that help us to work best—this improves our productivity, job satisfaction and overall wellbeing.

6

## Monitor job stress levels across your workforce.

Consider using a system that monitors the mental health and wellbeing of your people to gather valuable data on the key sources of stress in your organisation.

One way to do this is by using a comprehensive wellbeing assessment tool such as our Umbrella Wellbeing Assessment, which is designed to provide organisations with a clear picture of the health and wellbeing of your employees to inform future support and improvements for your people.





# 09 Balancing high workloads while promoting workplace wellbeing

When we talk about the "core challenge" of balancing workload with wellbeing, one of the solutions we always recommend is that employers support employees to proactively balance challenges with recovery.

That is, we encourage our people to take good breaks during the day, in the evening and over the weekend and have decent holidays. We all know that when we rest well, and often, we are better able to meet the challenges of our work and life and thrive—rather than burn out.

Ideally, we want our employees to take breaks and manage their workload. They should feel like they're swimming in the ocean on a calm day. The waves come and they go, and the rest time in-between can be used to recharge and catch a breath. (By the way, this is also good advice for business owners and decision-makers, not just employees.)

When people think that "taking a break" feels impossible, it is often because their workload is the equivalent of a stormy day at sea. The waves come without breaks, and working through each one is more of a struggle than the last.

If you can see evidence of a stormy sea affecting your employees and the wellbeing of your workplace, how do you encourage your employees to take better breaks?

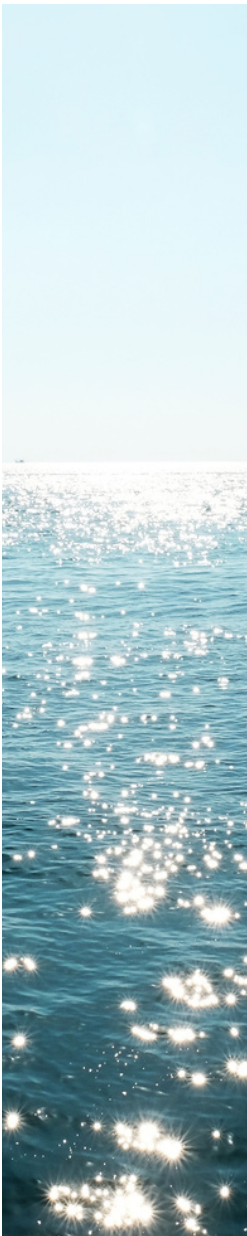


## Step 1: Plan well

While any breaks are valuable, and spontaneous breaks can be fun—the Friday afternoon off, or the longer lunch—the hardest-hitting holidays for managing our workload are usually the ones that last a week or longer.

Encourage your employees to plan well for these breaks which means scheduling them proactively, taking holidays at regular points during the year, not just during summer break. It also means supporting your employees to communicate widely with the people in your workplace who need to know, including meeting with their manager to discuss cover while they're off.

As an employer, it's crucial that there is a joint agreement about breaks being "switched-off time", by reassuring your employee that it's OK to say (on their out-of-office email auto-reply, for example), "I will not be checking emails, answering work calls, or progressing any projects". And, if necessary, agreeing what steps need to be taken to make sure that is possible.



### Step 2: Switch off

When planned well (Step 1), our employees will know that all their ducks are in a row, and they can turn off their work devices with confidence when it's time to switch into holiday mode. This is the most crucial part of maximising a holiday break—that a person has completely, psychologically detached themselves from work.

Psychological detachment only occurs when a person mentally, emotionally, and physically separates from work. A holiday isn't serving its purpose if one eye is on a work phone, or part of a person's brain is still mulling over work problems. If they need to, support them to keep a written list of important work-related thoughts as they appear, and commit to leaving them there on the page until they get back to work. This helps them let the thoughts go, and not float around their holiday brain.

### Step 3: Careful reintegration

When you meet with your employee to plan cover for their holiday, make a point of discussing their reintegration plan. It may sound silly, but without a solid plan, work can tarnish the latter half of our employee's holiday with the impending fear of what "Monday" brings—the unanswered emails and the metaphorical fires that need dousing.

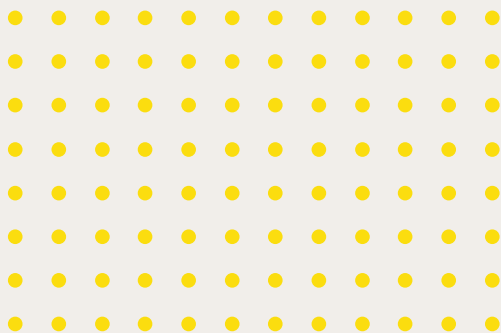
A good reintegration plan might include non-negotiable chunks of blocked-out time in the first few days, to sort and respond to emails and catch up on what was missed, before launching back into the land of meetings and action. Importantly, be clear on how they will build rest and recovery into their everyday rhythms, too.

Our key message here is that none of this is possible without a culture that supports good recovery practices. Organisations have a duty of care to support employees, helping each of them to "control what they can" and build recovery time into their weeks.

To achieve this, managers need to enable and empower employees to take regular and decent breaks, and to support their workload management when they are off. Colleagues must celebrate one another when they take breaks and embrace the opportunity to support this behaviour—knowing that it will be reciprocated.

**And at the heart of it, organisations need to consider whether they are resourced appropriately. If workload cannot be managed, to the extent that employees cannot take breaks, and—importantly—can't return from breaks without working overtime, then there aren't enough people doing the job, or expectations of output need to be re-evaluated. This often means that the root of managing workload and wellbeing comes with a short-term financial hit (e.g., hiring more people, or reducing workload demands), knowing that the long-term gain from prioritising wellbeing will be well worth the investment.**

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## 10 Final thoughts

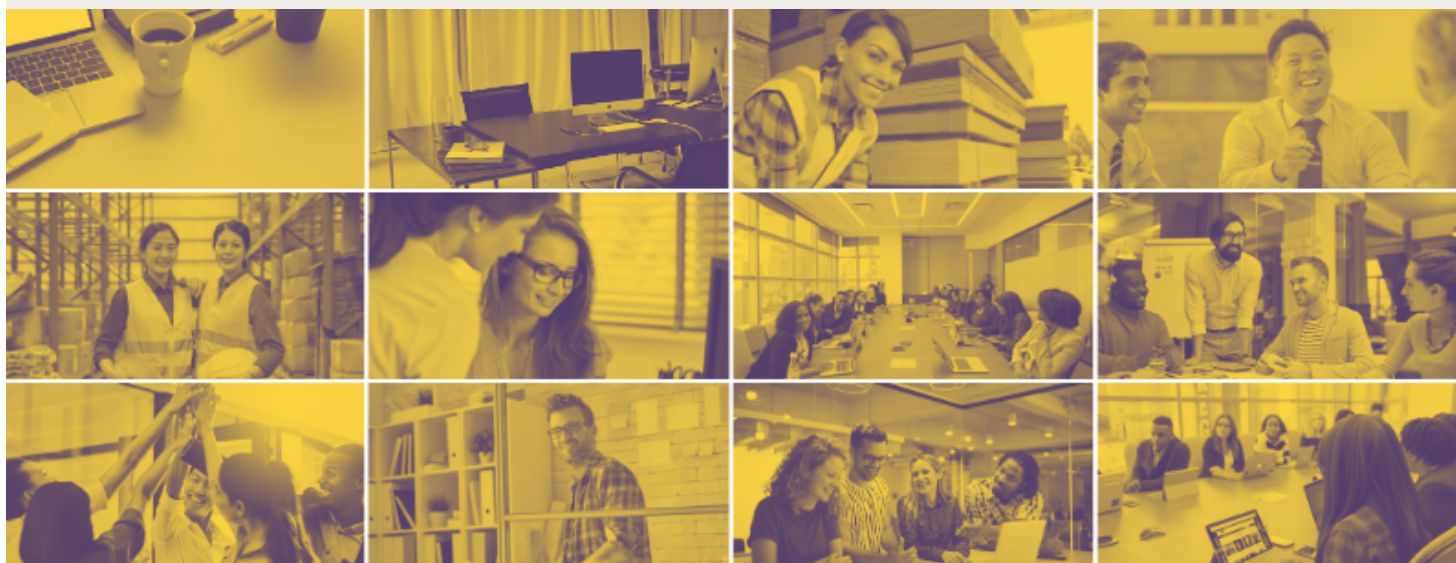
If the workload/wellbeing problem sounds thorny, that's probably because it is. While there are great steps we can take to support balanced workloads, sometimes we need to take a step out and look at the big workplace picture. The good news for you? Looking at the big picture and unpacking thorny problems is where our team of psychologists thrives.

At Umbrella, we understand the importance of identifying and managing psychosocial risks like workload and job demands, and the impact they have on our mental health and wellbeing. That's why we offer psychosocial risk and wellbeing assessments, psychologist-led workshops and training, alongside guidance for developing and implementing wellbeing strategies that work.

You can speak to our team on 0800 643 000, or find out more by visiting our website at [www.umbrella.org.nz](http://www.umbrella.org.nz).

**[Click this link to book an initial free consultation](#)**  
**or speak to our team on 0800 643 000.**

Umbrella is the trading name of Umbrella Wellbeing Ltd.



### About the research:

Research findings are based on survey data collected during 2022 from working New Zealanders (N = 7597) who work in a variety of organisations and industries (e.g., healthcare, utilities, construction and manufacturing, administration and retail). Respondents were 61% female, 33% male, 6% gender diverse. Ages ranged from under 20 years to over 65. The majority of respondents were New Zealand European (58%), Māori (20%) or Pacific peoples (Fijian, Samoan, Cook Island Māori, Tongan or Niuean: 9%).