

FIT FOR WORK IN THE ERA OF COVID-19: HEALTHY IS THE NEW WEALTHY

This report contains research delivered by Sussex Innovation on behalf of Intrinsic Wellbeing Ltd between 1st and 30th June. Sussex Innovation is an incubation network for high-growth businesses, owned by the University of Sussex. The methodology was desk research-based insight and observations.

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WHAT DO WE MEAN BY WELLBEING IN THE WORKPLACE?

Although the modern-day concept of ‘wellbeing’ has been around since the mid-1950s¹, it’s only in recent years that this holistic approach to our health and lifestyle has gained real momentum. Described by the World Health Organization as “a positive state of health that is more than the absence of an illness”², wellbeing can take many forms; it is a complex and multi-dimensional approach that can contribute to helping us feel good, happy, and function well.³

A sense of wellbeing must be actively pursued; it is significantly influenced by our physical, social and cultural environments, including our working environment and relationships therein.⁴ According to the UK government, “[wellbeing] enables people to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, form positive relationships with others, and meaningfully contribute to the community.”⁵



“ We are currently experiencing a disruptive period of rapid and forced evolution into an era of remote working, and our reliance on technology and good working practices to achieve and survive this has increased tenfold. ”

¹ Global Wellness Institute (2019) History of Wellness: <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/industry-research/history-of-wellness/>

² Five Ways to Wellbeing (Date unknown) About Wellbeing: <https://5waystowellbeing.org.au/about-wellbeing/>

³ Sarah Stewart Brown (Date unknown) About Wellbeing, Five Ways to Wellbeing: <https://5waystowellbeing.org.au/about-wellbeing/>

⁴ Five Ways to Wellbeing (Date unknown) About Wellbeing: <https://5waystowellbeing.org.au/about-wellbeing/>

⁵ UK Government (2008) Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project Report: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/292450/mental-capital-wellbeing-report.pdf

WHY INCORPORATE WELLBEING INTO OUR WORKING LIVES?

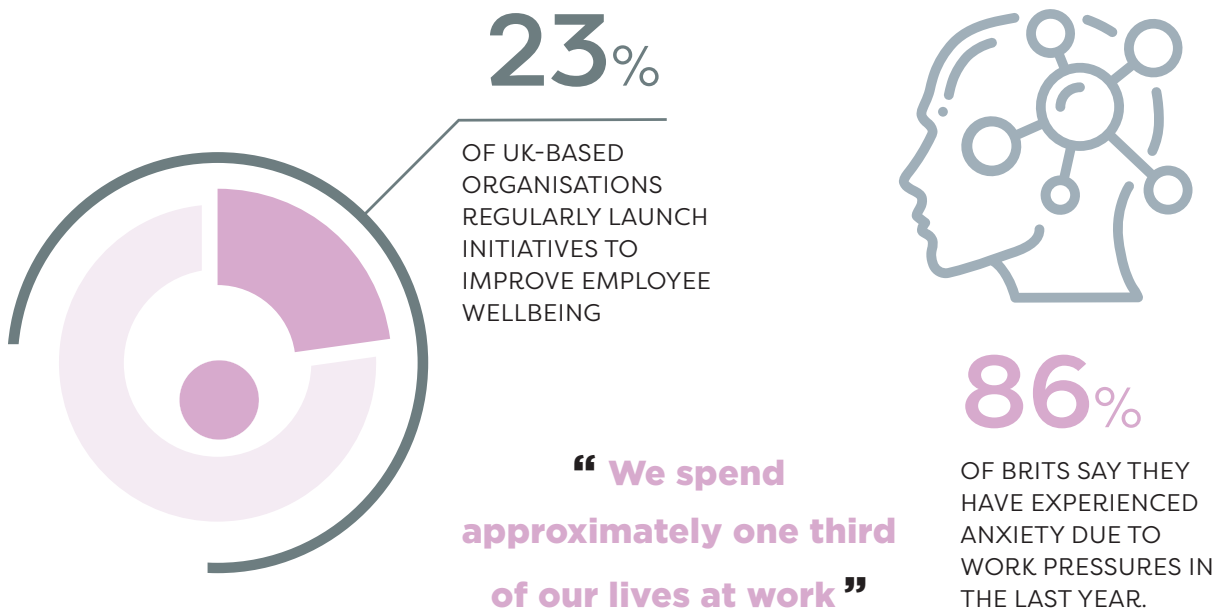
We spend approximately one third of our lives at work.⁶ It is axiomatic that stress in the workplace can have negative implications on not only the health of the employee, but the business itself. According to the *Harvard Business Review*, in the US alone, one in five adults suffers from mental health challenges each year, costing companies 200 million lost work days, along with \$200 billion.⁷

Wellbeing in the workplace is therefore a necessity, and ignoring it brings real peril – at both an organisational and individual level. ‘Burnout’ is now an occupational phenomenon⁸ and a workplace epidemic⁹ that manifests in compromised physical and mental health.¹⁰

Wellbeing at work is therefore imperative for both the workforce and business. For many employers, wellbeing schemes are now part of the ethical responsibility for employee welfare. As reported in *Forbes* magazine, it’s about “protecting your human capital, your most valuable asset.”¹¹

According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the pre-COVID-19 workplace increasingly recognised “the positive link between employee wellbeing and long-term organisational health.”¹² According to the UK government’s *Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project*, “there is a great deal of evidence that interesting and fulfilling work can be generally beneficial for mental health.”¹³ Additionally, the CIPD has found that “healthy workplaces help people to flourish and reach their potential.”¹⁴

Yet very few businesses are actually addressing this issue in a meaningful sense. A 2019 Microsoft report found that only 23 per cent of UK-based organisations regularly launch initiatives to improve employee wellbeing, and 53 per cent of employees disagree that their organisation has training in place to help them embrace a healthy, balanced lifestyle. The report revealed that 86 per cent of Brits say they have experienced anxiety due to work pressures in the last year. This is leading to difficulties in switching off from work (87 per cent), sleeping (86 per cent), and feelings of failure (79 per cent).¹⁵



⁶ World Health Organization (1994) Global strategy on occupational health for all: The way to health at work: https://www.who.int/occupational_health/publications/globstrategy/en/index2.html#:~:text=Introduction%3A%20The%20right%20to%20health,their%20families%20and%20to%20society

⁷ Charlotte Lieberman (2019) What Wellness Programs Don't Do For Workers, *Harvard Business Review*: <https://hbr.org/2019/08/what-wellness-programs-dont-do-for-workers>

⁸ World Health Organization (2019) Burn-out an “occupational phenomenon”, *International Classification of Diseases*: https://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/burn-out/en/

⁹ Ashley Turner (2019) The World Health Organization officially recognises workplace “burnout” as an occupational phenomenon, *CNBC*: <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/05/28/who-recognizes-workplace-burnout-as-an-occupational-phenomenon.html>

¹⁰ Naz Beheshti (2019) 10 Timely Statistics about the connection between employee engagement and wellness, *Forbes*: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nazbeheshti/2019/01/16/10-timely-statistics-about-the-connection-between-employee-engagement-and-wellness/#5211fa622a0>

¹¹ Naz Beheshti (2019) 10 Timely Statistics about the connection between employee engagement and wellness, *Forbes*: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nazbeheshti/2019/01/16/10-timely-statistics-about-the-connection-between-employee-engagement-and-wellness/#5211fa622a0>

¹² Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2020) Wellbeing at work, CIPD: <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/factsheet#19510>

¹³ Government Office for Science (2008) *Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project Report*: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/attachment_data/file/292453/mental-capital-wellbeing-summary.pdf

¹⁴ Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2020) Wellbeing at work, CIPD: <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/factsheet#19510>

¹⁵ <https://news.microsoft.com/en-gb/2019/10/09/tech-can-tackle-uks-unhealthy-always-on-working-practices-but-only-if-company-bosses-want-to-use-it-microsoft-report-reveals/>

HOW DO WE MEASURE WELLBEING?

There is compelling evidence that wellbeing can be a sound commercial strategy. FTSE 100 companies that prioritise employee engagement and wellbeing outperform the rest of the FTSE 100 by 10 per cent.¹⁶ A study by Deloitte found that, for every £1 spent supporting employee mental health, businesses were getting £5 back in investment through reduced presenteeism, absenteeism and turnover.¹⁷

That said, measuring the impact of a wellbeing strategy is an ongoing and long-term process that requires commitment to implementing along with regularly reviewing a sustainable strategy. For example, to understand how impactful a wellbeing strategy will be, it is important to consider employee engagement. Low employee engagement will yield low to no impact, however, a higher percentage of employees participating in a wellbeing strategy will have more widespread results.¹⁸

As with employee health, businesses must take a more holistic approach to understanding the effect on the wider organisation. Some of the perceived benefits to the business that effective wellbeing strategies instil within the workplace, are as follows:

- Reduced sickness and improved resilience¹⁹
- Lower recruitment costs as the business is more likely to attract and retain talent,²⁰ and employees are more likely to recommend their workplace to others²¹
- Improvements to productivity^{22, 23, 24}
- Positive and collaborative social environment due to strengthened relationships, both within and between teams²⁵
- Culture of mutual respect,²⁶ with employees feeling respected and supported, allowing them to work effectively²⁷
- Schemes specifically focusing on mental health in the workplace were found to be cost effective as they reduced

presenteeism, labour turnover and recruitment²⁸

- Employees responded well to having clear expectations and were more likely to surpass their KPIs²⁹
- Employees are more likely to be engaged with their work and are more likely to 'go the extra mile' when they felt that their bosses cared about their wellbeing³⁰

These benefits can be accredited to reducing overall employee costs. With poor mental health costing UK businesses £43 billion a year³¹ due to absenteeism, illness and burnout, now is the time to start investing in employee wellbeing.



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¹⁶ Mind (Date unknown) How to promote wellbeing and tackle the causes of work-related mental health problems: https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/4662/resource3_howtopromotewellbeingfinal.pdf

¹⁷ Deloitte (2020) Poor mental health costs UK employers up to £45 billion a year: <https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/press-releases/articles/poor-mental-health-costs-uk-employers-up-to-pound-45-billion-a-year.html#:~:text=New%20analysis%20by%20Deloitte%2C%20published,to%20support%20employees%20mental%20health.>

¹⁸ Chris Pinner (2020) How to design a successful wellbeing programme, People Management: <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/voices/comment/how-to-design-a-successful-wellbeing-programme>

¹⁹ Arla Day and Samantha A Penny (2017) Essential elements of organizational initiatives to improve workplace wellbeing, Chapter 22, The Routledge Companion to Wellbeing at Work

²⁰ Chris Pinner (2020) How to design a successful wellbeing programme, People Management: <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/voices/comment/how-to-design-a-successful-wellbeing-programme>

²¹ Henry Albrecht (2016) Watch what happens when you invest in employee wellness, Entrepreneur: <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/276190>

²² Chris Pinner (2020) How to design a successful wellbeing programme, People Management: <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/voices/comment/how-to-design-a-successful-wellbeing-programme>

²³ Henry Albrecht (2016), Watch what happens when you invest in employee wellness, Entrepreneur: <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/276190>

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²⁹ Naz Beheshti (2019) 10 Timely Statistics about the connection between employee engagement and wellness, Forbes: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nazbeheshti/2019/01/16/10-timely-statistics-about-the-connection-between-employee-engagement-and-wellness/#5211faf622a0>

³⁰ Henry Albrecht (2016) Watch what happens when you invest in employee wellness, Entrepreneur: <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/276190>

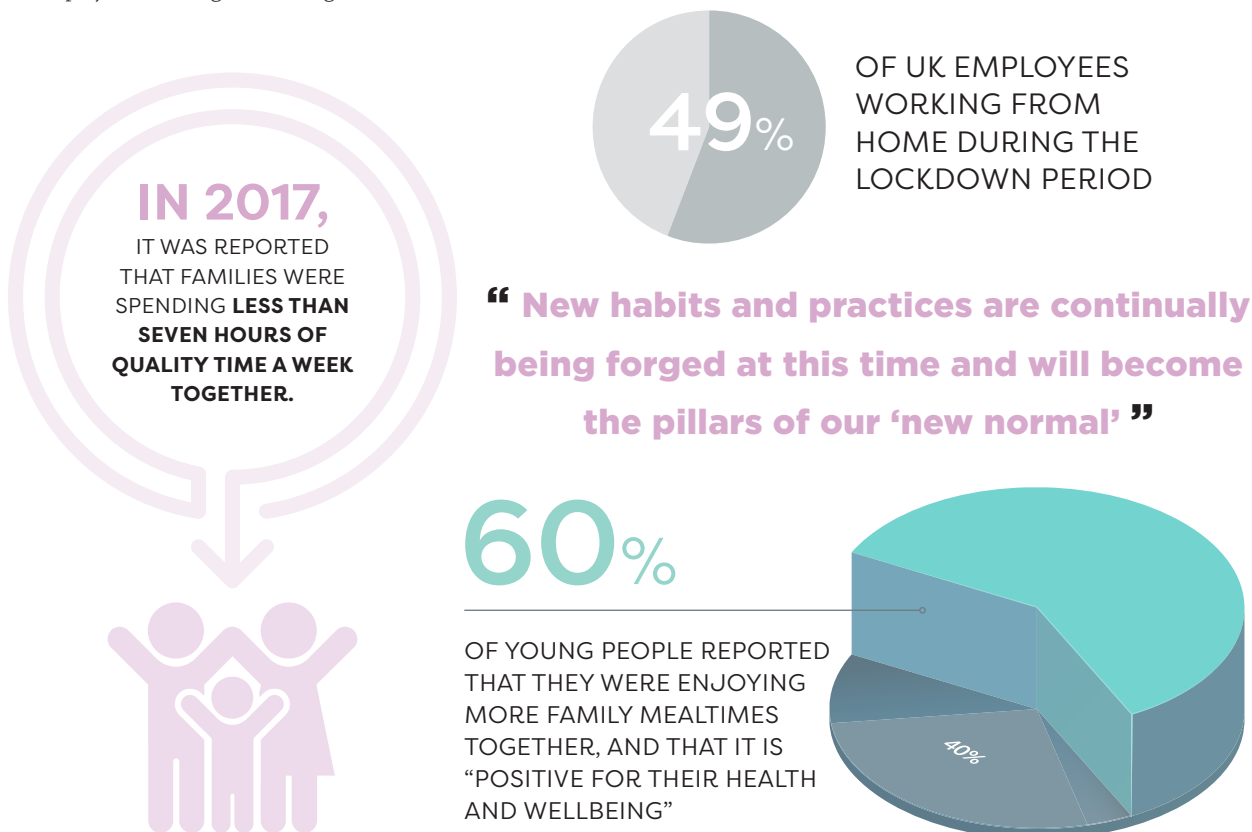
³¹ MFHA England (2020) Counting the cost of poor mental health in the workplace: <https://mhfaengland.org/mhfa-centre/ceo-blog/cost-workplace-mental-health-simon-blake/>

SECTION 1: WORKING WELLBEING – BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER COVID-19

The current crisis has been transformational. Our working habits changed forcibly and overnight, with 49 per cent of UK employees working from home during the lockdown period.³² We are currently experiencing a disruptive period of rapid and forced evolution into an era of remote working, and our reliance on technology and good working practices to achieve and survive this has increased tenfold. It is up to us now, and our employees, to determine whether the COVID-19 crisis is just that – a crisis – or the catalyst for real and lasting change.

At this time of great upheaval, people are turning back to the basics of wellbeing to cope with the situation.³³ The rise in virtual meetings during lockdown suggests that we are relying on our relationships with friends, family and colleagues for stability.³⁴ New habits and practices are continually being forged at this time and will become the pillars of our ‘new normal’. Therefore, we need wellbeing to be instilled as a central aspect of our working lives during COVID-19 to ensure that healthy working habits in the future will be beneficial to all parties.

COVID-19 has led many to re-appraise their relationship with work. In 2017, it was reported that families were spending less than seven hours of quality time a week together.³⁵ It is perhaps no surprise that parents have reported enjoying spending more time with children during lockdown³⁶, and 60 per cent of young people reported that they were enjoying more family mealtimes together, and that it is “positive for their health and wellbeing.”³⁷ Additionally, people are spending significantly more time exercising and pursuing hobbies.³⁸ With more people becoming aware of the importance of their own health and wellbeing, businesses must reflect this in their culture and nurture these steps towards a healthier future by ensuring that employee wellbeing is “non-negotiable and valued.”³⁹



³² Philip Inman (2020) Growing number of Britons working from home, says ONS, The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jun/18/uk-working-from-home-ons-coronavirus-businesses>

³³ Lucie Stephens (2020) Five Ways to Wellbeing at a time of social distancing, New Economics: <https://neweconomics.org/2020/03/five-ways-to-wellbeing-at-a-time-of-social-distancing>

³⁴ Business Matters (2020) The rise of virtual meetings during lockdown: <https://www.bmmagazine.co.uk/business/the-rise-of-virtual-meetings-during-lockdown/>

³⁵ Bassetts Vitamins (2017) Supporting Family Life with More Colour, Purple Paper: <https://www.bassettsvitamins.co.uk/~media/Bassettsvitamins/en/Pdf/Bassettsvitamins%20PurplePaper%20Website.pdf>

³⁶ Ipsos MORI (2020) Social media, gardening, books, bread and having sex – how Britons are whiling away coronavirus lockdown: <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/social-media-gardening-books-bread-and-having-sex-how-britons-are-whiling-away-coronavirus-lockdown>

³⁷ CBC (2020) Young people cooking and eating as a family more during lockdown: <https://www.bbc.com/news/round-53247045>

³⁸ Ipsos MORI (2020) Social media, gardening, books, bread and having sex – how Britons are whiling away coronavirus lockdown: <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/social-media-gardening-books-bread-and-having-sex-how-britons-are-whiling-away-coronavirus-lockdown>

³⁹ Fiona Bugler (2020) Now is the time to focus on wellbeing at work: <https://medium.com/age-of-awareness/how-is-the-time-to-focus-on-wellbeing-at-work-214cf1169be>

⁴⁰ Mark Richer (2020) UK workers say they will work from home after lockdown eased, the HR Director: <https://www.thehrdirector.com/business-news/future-of-work/uk-workers-say-they-will-continue-to-work-from-home-after-lockdown-is-eased-and-majority-are-happy-to-wait-another-month-before-returning-to-the-office/>

⁴¹ Office for National Statistics (2020) Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritain/5june2020>

Working from home is no longer a privilege

Prior to the pandemic, working from home was somewhat of a privilege. People are now recognising the benefits of being able to work from the comfort of their own home, giving them greater flexibility over how and where they spend their time.⁴⁰

The impact of COVID-19 is going to have a lasting effect on how and where people choose to work, and where they choose to live. One study in May 2020 found that, while unsettling, working from home has quickly become the norm and is a trend set to continue post-COVID-19.

Businesses must adapt to the rise in popularity of working from home in order to thrive in the post-COVID-19 era. Now is the time to instigate and test new wellbeing practices and initiatives such as accessible flexitime contracts, which will pave the way for a healthy future.

“ There will be a shift in how offices look at the purpose they serve, and their survival into the future will depend on the successful integration of wellbeing in the workplace. ”



Technology is filling the gaps

With the advent of smartphones, cloud computing and artificial intelligence (AI), technology has permeated every aspect of our 21st-century lifestyle. The crucial role of technology cannot be downplayed in 2020 as the impact of becoming a socially distanced society has left behind certain lifestyle habits, which we can only hope one day will be revived. We have found ourselves unable to visit the gym, go swimming and socialise with others. The affect this has had on our mental health is devastating; 56 per cent of people have reported feeling more stressed and anxious as a direct result of COVID-19 and the resulting lockdown.⁴¹

Technology has stepped up to fill the gap. Digital fitness and workout apps have surged in popularity; as people around the globe started working out at home, the Les Mills™ online platform reported a 900 per cent increase in signups.⁴² Meditation apps have also reported an increase, with Headspace now boasting 45 million users⁴³ as people replace their classes and teachers with recorded sessions and AI.

Video conferencing and cloud-based computing has been crucial in the move from a physical workspace to our new virtual realities. Microsoft likened the shift in working as seeing “two years of digital transformation in two months”; in April, its Teams application reported 200 million meeting participants in a single day.⁴⁴ Prior to COVID-19, the rise of technology in the workplace was, at times, a cause for concern due to its role in work-related burnout. Technology has enabled people to take work with them on holiday, respond to emails at the weekend, and take calls out of scheduled hours.⁴⁵ Now, the lines are blurred more than ever and, in addition to this, businesses have another technological phenomenon to acknowledge and overcome – feelings of exhaustion after video calls, or ‘Zoom Fatigue’.⁴⁶

As we enter the ‘new normal’, businesses need to ensure that the virtual and physical is blended in a mindful way. Ensuring we have the structures and tools to do this is vital; having a wellbeing framework at this time may help employees to continue looking after themselves as well as each other.

⁴² locallyn Evans (2020) Has coronavirus changed the fitness industry forever?, ITV: <https://www.itv.com/news/2020-05-01/fitness-industry-exercise-home-gym-lockdown-coronavirus-covid-19-workout/>

⁴³ Sophie Morris (2020) Mindfulness apps are booming in lockdown - how to stay chilled using your phone or on your own, iNews: <https://iNews.co.uk/news-lifestyle/wellbeing/mindfulness-apps-coronavirus-lockdown-explained-chilled-headspace-448667>

⁴⁴ Jared Spataro (2020) 2 years of digital transformation in 2 months, Microsoft: <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/blog/2020/04/30/2-years-digital-transformation-2-months/>

⁴⁵ Ashley Turner (2019) The World Health Organization officially recognises workplace ‘burnout’ as an occupational phenomenon, CNBC: <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/05/28/who-recognizes-workplace-burnout-as-an-occupational-phenomenon.html>

⁴⁶ Liz Fosslien and Mollie West Duffy (2020) How to Combat Zoom Fatigue, Harvard Business Review: <https://hbr.org/2020/04/how-to-combat-zoom-fatigue>

SECTION 2: TOWARDS A HOPEFUL FUTURE

We are all familiar with the 20th-century dualistic model of many offices, both large and small. However, research suggests that future workspaces will centre around wellbeing, with biophilic design becoming increasingly important.⁴⁷ Biophilic design focuses on the innate attraction of humans to nature and natural processes, and mimicking nature in offices has reportedly helped to lower blood pressure and heart rate levels.

“Offices will become places where people go to have conversations, share ideas, collaborate with others, and to be trained and mentored – it’s very much a human landscape” says WORKTECH’s Jeremy Myerson.⁴⁸

The future of the workplace is human-centric. Research showing the strong correlation between employee health and business wealth is plentiful and will continue to grow following our hopeful transition into the ‘new-normal’ realities of a post-COVID-19 era. Additionally, the environment-orientated and digitally native Generation Z is entering the workforce, and its stance on social issues may have a catalysing effect on the shift to biophilic, collaborative ways of working.⁴⁹ People will work where they feel comfortable and will choose to keep connected using technology that we’re relying on right now. There will be a shift in how offices look at the purpose they serve, and their survival into the future will depend on the successful integration of wellbeing in the workplace.

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⁴⁷ Nespresso Professional and The Future Laboratory (Date unknown) Around the Office: Workplace Futures: https://www.nespresso.com/ecom/medias/sys_master/public/12725472133150/Nespresso-WORKPLACE-FUTURES.pdf

⁴⁸ Nespresso Professional and The Future Laboratory (Date unknown) Around the Office: Workplace Futures: https://www.nespresso.com/ecom/medias/sys_master/public/12725472133150/Nespresso-WORKPLACE-FUTURES.pdf

⁴⁹ Kim Parker and Ruth Igielnik (2020) On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: what we know about Gen Z so far, Pew Research Center: <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/essay/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far>

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