

Wellness in the Workplace 2017

SURVEY REPORT



1. Background to the survey

Purpose and overview

This is the third time the Southern Cross Health Society – BusinessNZ Wellness in the Workplace Survey has been carried out in New Zealand.

This report outlines the main results of the third biennial Southern Cross Health Society – BusinessNZ Wellness in the Workplace survey.

The survey is intended to help employers benchmark absence levels among their own employees and identify how best to boost attendance and enhance employee health. It also provides policy makers with views on occupational health practice and absence in the workplace, information that has often been lacking in this country.

The survey also provides the business community with information on the overall health of their employees. This now has greater importance given recent health and safety legislation introduced in New Zealand.

The third survey was conducted between February and April 2017. Ten business associations including BusinessNZ regional organisations EMA, BusinessCentral, Canterbury Employers' Chamber of Commerce and Otago Southland Employers' Association, took part sending it out to a proportion of their members. In addition, BusinessNZ sent the questionnaire to a number of Major Company and Gold Group members, as well as a number of Government departments. Respondents were asked to report their absence data for the 12-month period 1 January to 31 December 2016, and to provide details of their policies and practices for managing employee attendance.

In total, 109 responses were received from entities across the private and public sectors, which was down from 113 responses in 2015. The respondent entities for 2017 employed 93,125 people, including 83,994 permanent staff. This was down from 116,218 people (including 97,837 permanent staff) in 2015, but similar

to 2013 of 97,116 and 89,955 respectively. The 2017 sample represented 4.97 percent of all employees in New Zealand, compared with 6.52 percent in 2015 and 5.68 percent in 2013¹.

Despite the dip in representation from previous years, the 2017 survey still represents a sizeable number of employees. By way of comparison, the most recent UK survey received 153 usable responses (representing 3.4 percent of all U.K. employees), despite its population being over 14 times larger than New Zealand's.

Prior New Zealand Research

There are relatively few sources of information available on the number of days away from work due to illness and injury in a New Zealand context.

Previous studies have looked at aspects of absenteeism and wellbeing in the workplace but there has been no overall attempt to provide a more comprehensive assessment of New Zealand's position with respect to the connections between absenteeism, sickness, costs and related workplace issues and practices.

Notes on survey comparisons

Although the surveys took place in 2013, 2015 and 2017, the fact that respondents were asked about their absence data for 2012, 2014 and 2016 means that for the purposes of this report, comparisons between the three surveys will state 2012, 2014 and 2016 as the comparison years.

¹ Based on 1,709,000, 1,781,300 and 1,874,800 filled jobs during the June 2012, 2014 and 2016 quarters respectively (Quarterly Employment Survey, StatisticsNZ).

6. Stress, fatigue and anxiety points

Key findings

- Overall stress and anxiety levels for all enterprises remain more on the moderate than high side.
- But stress and anxiety have increased over the last two surveys.
- Workload has historically been the biggest issue for businesses with 50+ staff, but the 2016 dataset shows that this is also now the primary issue for businesses with fewer than 50 staff.
- Larger businesses are more likely to have stress identification processes in place, while businesses with fewer than 50 staff are now more likely to have mechanisms for identifying employee stress.
- Large and small businesses are now far more likely to have some form of employee assistance programmes for stress.

Stress and fatigue in the workplace

Most western-style countries are becoming increasingly aware of health issues and the impact work and lifestyle choices can have on staff wellbeing and work performance. Many are looking for ways to deal with employee stress, fatigue and anxiety to minimise lost working time and improve overall wellbeing.

In New Zealand, recent changes to health and safety legislation have seen a fairly rapid change in mindset towards safeguarding staff safety. However, safeguarding staff health has been a lesser concern, even though this is an area where much can be done in a positive and low cost fashion, particularly around stress, fatigue and anxiety.

Table 12 shows on a scale of 1 (almost never stressful for most staff) to 5 (highly stressful for most staff) the current stress/anxiety levels amongst staff. Generally speaking, it is still the case that the larger the business the greater the stress level, although not by a significant extent.

One concerning aspect of the 2016 results was the increase in the overall score for stress/anxiety from 2.69 in 2014 to 3.02 in 2016. This is consistent with

Table 12: Rating general stress/anxiety levels amongst staff (2016)

Employee Count	Stress/anxiety levels amongst staff (mean)
1-5	3.22
6-9	2.50
10-49	2.91
50-99	2.85
100+	3.18
<50	2.94
>50	3.09
Private sector	3.01
Public sector	3.08
All	3.02

results in table 13 that showed general stress/anxiety levels increasing during 2016 for those who provided a direction, with a net +22.9 percent of firms noting an increase, compared with +14.3 percent in 2014. For those with 50+ staff, the net result was +30.5 percent, more than double the +14.0 percent recorded for those with fewer than 50 staff.

Table 13: Change in direction of general stress levels staff experienced (2016)

Option	All (%)	Fewer than 50 staff (%)	50+ staff (%)
Increased	31.2	24.0	37.3
Stayed roughly the same	56.9	64.0	50.8
Decreased	8.3	10.0	6.8
Net result	+22.9	+14.0	+30.5

Figure 8 outlines the main causes of stress in the workplace. 'General workload' is the most stress/anxiety causing issue for businesses with 50+ staff. The 2016 dataset shows that this is also now the primary issue for those with fewer than 50 staff (compared with 'family relationships' in 2014). Beyond that, the order of issues relating to stress/fatigue has shown some movement since 2014, with a noticeable change in the proportion of smaller enterprises recording 'long hours', which rose from 8.1 percent in 2014 to 22 percent in 2016.

Figure 9 outlines the main practices businesses use as part of their stress identification process. As in 2014, the results show, overall, larger businesses are more likely to have identification processes in place, given their ability to implement these types of structures. Also, key staff in larger organisations are less able to have a close relationship with a larger number of workers, so more formal processes are required.

However, in comparison with 2014, the 2016 data set shows two positive differences. First, the proportion of enterprises with more than 50 staff that have undertaken 'training for managers to identify and manage stress' increased from 37.3 percent to 55.9 percent. Also, for those with fewer than 50 staff, the proportion of enterprises that did not have any practices to identify stress decreased from 53.2 percent in 2014 to 36.0 percent in 2016.

In relation to the stress management processes in figure 10, it is interesting to note changes in options chosen by the two groups identified. For those with more than 50 staff, 'employee assistance programmes' were the key option in 2016, overtaking 'flexible hours' from 2014. Also, those with fewer than 50 staff are now more likely to have some form of 'employee assistance programmes', rising from 14.5 percent in 2014 to 32 percent in 2016.

In terms of public/private comparisons, the fact that all Government agencies involved in the survey have more than 50 staff means the way they identify and manage stress tends to be similar to those in the private sector with 50+ staff. However, some of the options were more pronounced with the public sector, such as 'employee assistance programmes' and 'flexible hours', which were both at 92.3 percent.

Looking ahead

- The results show that in broad terms, larger businesses have remained more stressful environments, although the gap is closing. Also, it is concerning that overall stress/anxiety continues to rise.
- Across enterprises, workload is now the key determinant for stress, while longer working hours are also on the rise for smaller enterprises.
- As discussed in the previous report, any steps towards reducing stress/anxiety among staff will struggle to make headway if net stress levels continue to show a sizeable increase year-on-year.
- The interrelationship of many of the causes of stress needs to be examined. For instance, an emphasis on managing workloads would be the best place to start, as it would also help mitigate the issue of long hours worked and the pressure

to meet work targets. Also, an environment that reduces general workload and long hours would help many staff with family or relationship issues, alleviating any strains that may exist for people outside work.

- Larger businesses tend to do a good job of identifying and putting processes in place for stress/anxiety issues, but questions remain about how that data is best used.

Figure 8: Main causes of stress (2016)

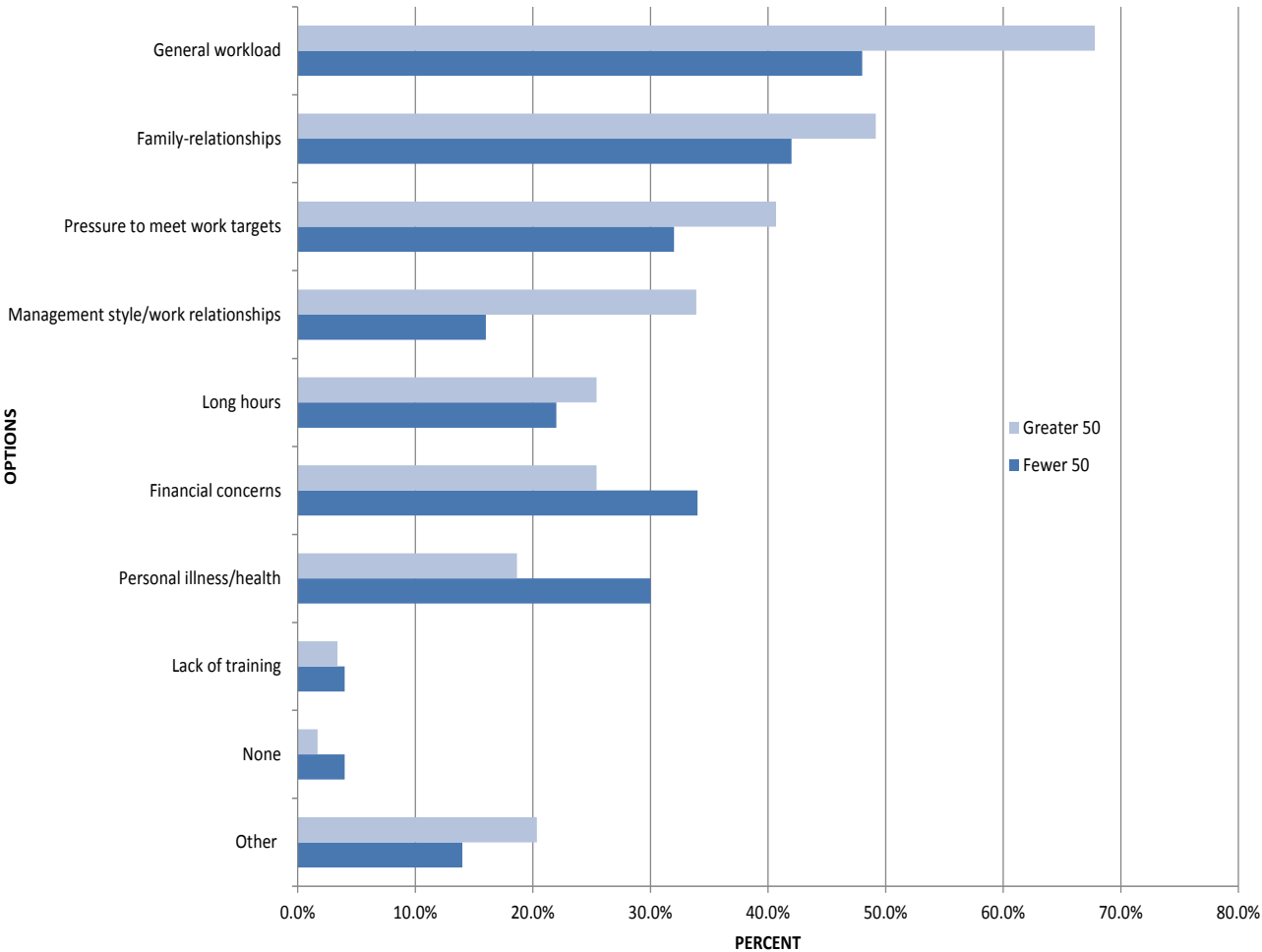


Figure 9: Practices undertaken as part of stress identification (2016)

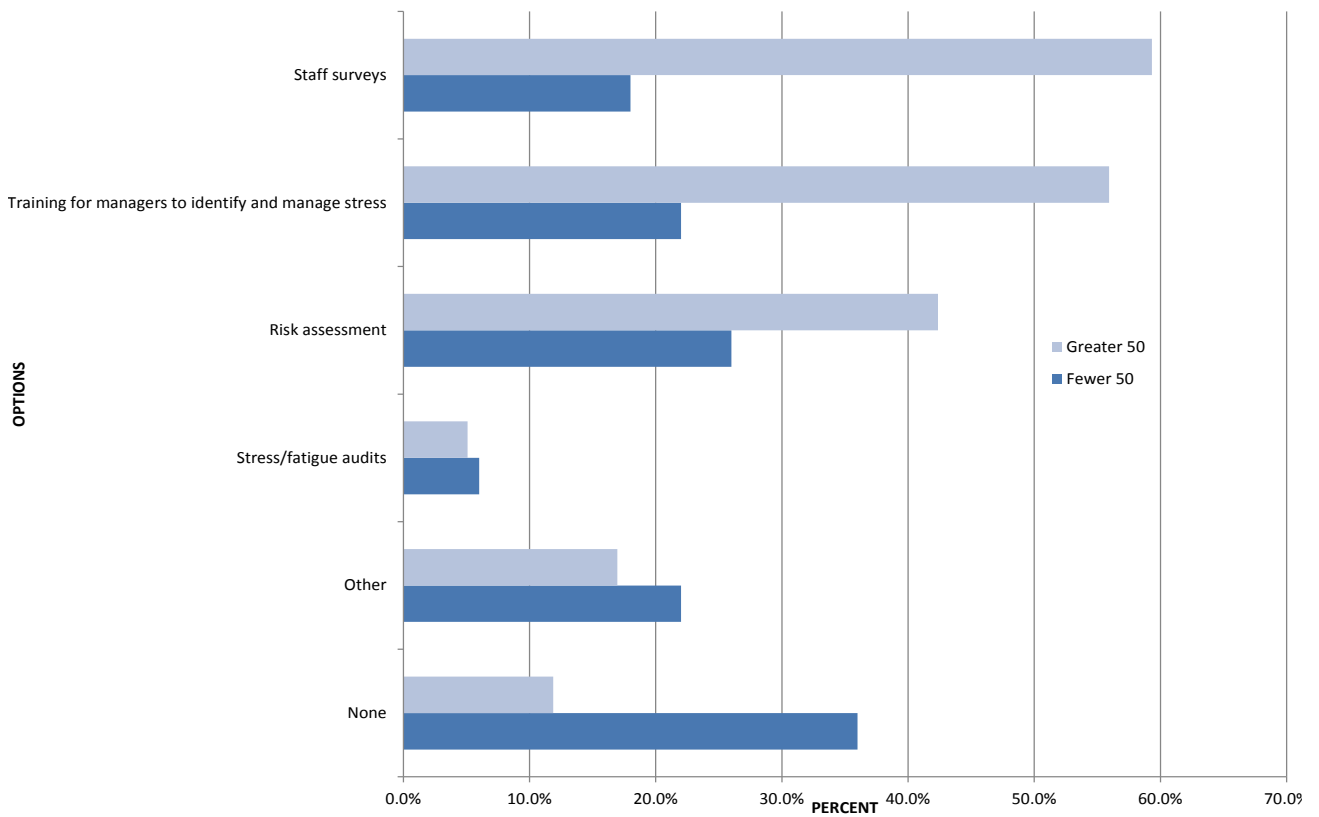


Figure 10: Stress management processes (2016)

