

# The Critical Role of Workforce Health in Resilience

by Piers Hudson

HR leaders seeking to improve their position coming out of the pandemic, rather than just recovering back to their starting point, need to elevate their view of resilience from just individual well-being to a broader sense of their workforce's health.

## The Productivity-Resilience Paradox

"Resilience" became one of the bywords for 2020 and 2021 as organizations sought to help their employees get through the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic by bolstering their individual resilience. Moreover, senior leadership teams began to consider the resilience of their

organizations overall; for example, the resilience of supply chains or product portfolios.

Eighteen months after the initial impacts of the pandemic, what have HR leaders learned about their workforces' resilience? The first surprising finding in our research was just how sustained employees' productivity has been. In early 2021, our survey found that upward of 86% of respondents believed their workforce's or team's

productivity had either sustained or increased during the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> This was further confirmed in research interviews.

Again and again, we heard the shift to remote or other new ways of working had been “incredibly smooth.” Employees, faced with unprecedented change in their work and home lives, had largely found a way to pull through. Some organizations even said the pandemic provided additional urgency or helped break down organizational silos, leading to improved results.

We briefly questioned whether there was actually a resilience challenge to address. Despite the pride in how adaptable and engaged employees had been, HR leaders were concerned whether the sustained performance was coming at some hidden cost that would be felt later. Furthermore, with limited sense of this potential cost, HR leaders were unsure whether their current efforts to support employees were working.

## Workforce Health: The Key Component of Resilience

These findings led us to delve deeper into what our clients meant when they spoke of resilience. This revealed a myriad of concerns, from employee burnout to employee fatigue with leadership communications. Some worried

their corporate culture was being undermined by remote working; others, that company decisions had eroded employees’ trust in their managers and leaders.

Despite these worries, few HR leaders could yet prove whether they actually had resilience problems in their organizations. While 51% of HR leaders said they could tell which parts of their workforce were resilient, only 14% said they had a method to measure resilience across the organization.<sup>2</sup>

We found that HR leaders’ concerns grouped into three categories:

- **Healthy employees** — The state of employees’ physical, financial and mental well-being
- **Healthy relationships** — The quality of employees’ relationships with their colleagues, managers and teams
- **Healthy work environment** — Whether the work culture and climate support resilience; for example, whether innovation, development and inclusion are valued

We used this insight to develop a rounded measure of “workforce health” (see Figure 1). This contains 16 individual variables, split among these three categories, allowing a better understanding of the true cost of sustained workforce performance through the pandemic.

**Figure 1. Components of Gartner’s Measure of Workforce Health**



## Significant Scale of Damage to Workforce Health

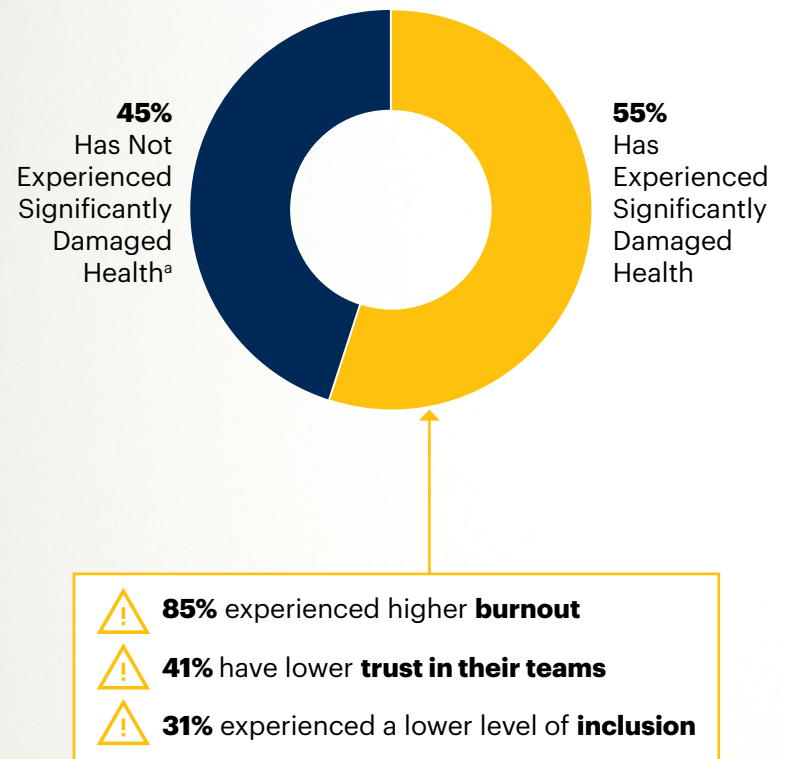
As it turns out, HR leaders were right to worry about these different aspects of workforce health. Based on this measure, 55% of employees have experienced damage to workforce health during the pandemic (see Figure 2). Importantly, this damage occurred across a range of variables — to not just their work-life balance or financial well-being but also their relationships and work environment. Taking data from before and during the pandemic, we measured “damage” as an employee experiencing an acute drop in at least three of the variables.

Furthermore, this level of damage was not limited to particular types of employees or particular industries. When we split the damage figure by job level, we found at least 50% of workers at the executive level, midlevel management and frontline level had experienced damage. Across all our industry categories, at least 35% of employees in every industry had experienced damage.<sup>1</sup>

Many leaders outside of HR are concerned about employees’ individual health but believe that recent high productivity suggests the impacts can be easily reversed with added time off or greater stability.

The extent of the damage certainly surprised us, but where the damage has occurred is also of concern. Many leaders outside of HR are concerned about employees’ individual health but believe that recent high productivity suggests the impacts can be easily reversed with added time off or greater stability. Not only is this unlikely in many of the employee health variables but also the damage done to relationships and the work environment will be harder to reverse. Qualities such as trust, feelings of inclusion and psychological safety are built up over time and will take time to repair. These elements will hold back organization-level performance even when individuals have recovered their own personal health.

**Figure 2. Damage to Employee Health**  
Percentage of Respondents



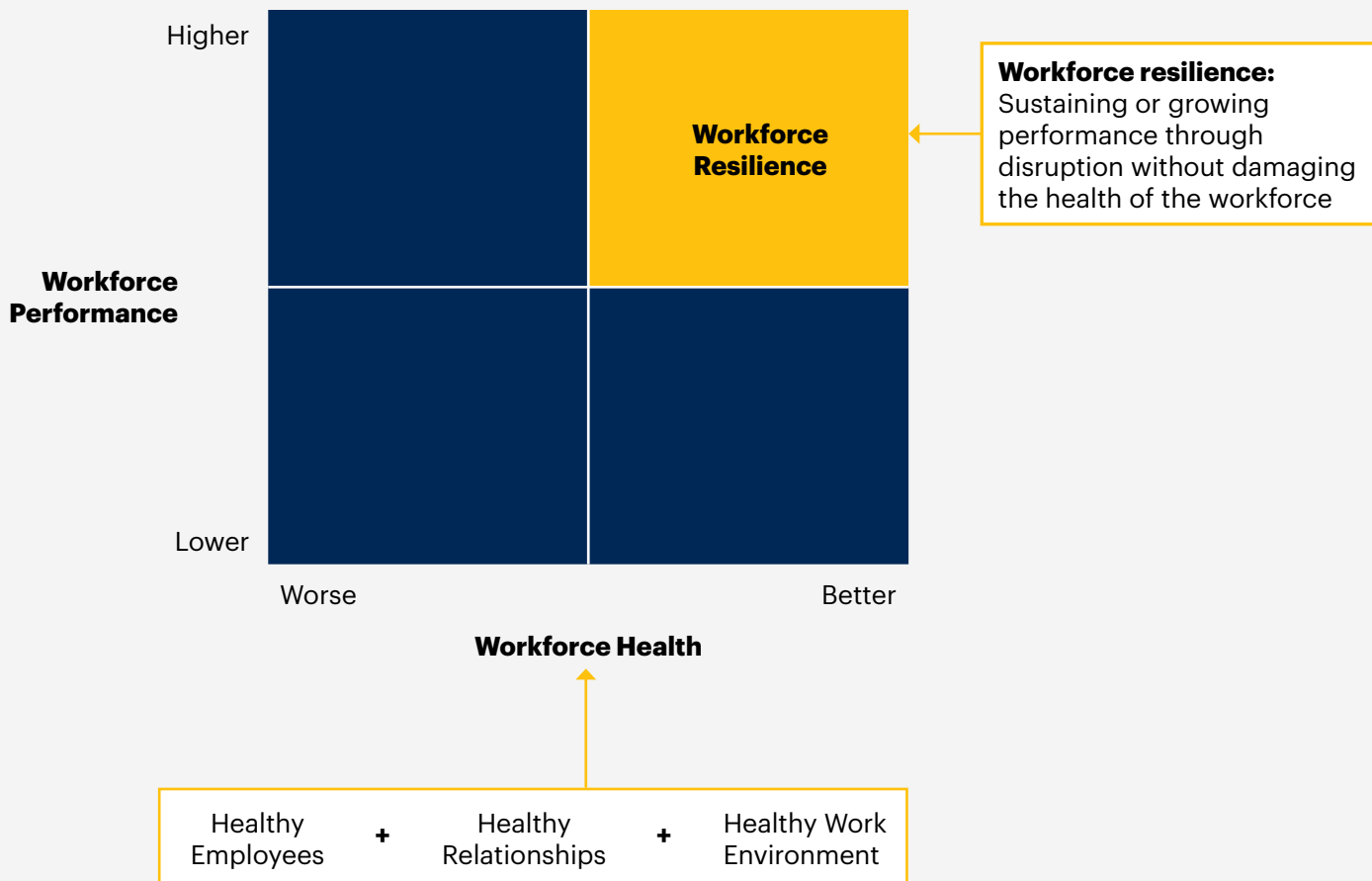
n = 3,690

Source: 2021 Gartner Workforce Resilience Employee Survey

<sup>a</sup> Significant damage is defined as experiencing an acute decline in at least three elements or a moderate decline in at least nine elements of workforce health.



**Figure 3. Gartner Model of Workforce Resilience**



Source: Gartner

These findings lead us to our definition of workforce resilience: **sustaining or growing performance through disruption without damaging the health of the workforce**. By including this balance of productivity and workforce health as well as all the aspects of workforce health, this definition highlights where damage exists and its implications for an organization (see Figure 3). It also provides a new way to see which resilience-building measures are effective. Hence, we have used our measure of workforce health to test a range of hypotheses from our clients, and the conventional wisdom, about who the pandemic impacted and whether initiatives to protect resilience have worked.

## Two Immediate Implications for HR Leaders

Two themes stand out in this research that point to what HR leaders need to do next. First, they need to consider how they measure workforce health, not just individual well-being. HR leaders have, for the most part, focused during the pandemic on measuring employees' individual health. This hides the myriad ways that disruption can impact the organization's current and future performance through damaged relationships and work environments.

Furthermore, HR leaders need to see how workforce health changes for different



employees at different times to track this before and after a disruption. The good news is that many organizations are already tracking many of the items in our workforce health measure, or similar metrics. These need to be combined to get a rounded view of how different individuals have experienced different types of damage, over time, to understand where this damage impacts workforce resilience.

Secondly, HR leaders can use this broader view of workforce health to look for opportunities to bolster this in a much wider way than just individual well-being support. Our findings show that aspects such as an individual's personal connection to their work and colleagues, or how work processes make it easy for them to get their work done, all have a significant impact on workforce health. HR leaders should also integrate resilience considerations into the design of any new HR or talent processes, or use our findings to see which existing HR and talent processes can be better leveraged to support workforce health. Consider, for example, how performance management can help deprioritize low-value work to protect workforce health,

or how return-to-the-workplace policies could damage workforce health if they reverse some of the conditions that have benefited certain groups of employees.

While the level of damage from the pandemic has been severe, HR leaders have more tools for addressing this damage than they may realize. A broader concept of resilience may seem intimidating at first, but it also provides a new platform for HR to drive organizational performance for the long term. of employees.

<sup>1</sup> 2021 Gartner Workforce Resilience Employee Survey, n = 3,690 employees

<sup>2</sup> 2021 Gartner Workforce Resilience Member Survey, n = 70 HR leaders

## Virtual Events



Gartner regularly hosts virtual events across a variety of Human Resources topics. These webinars present an opportunity for you to gain insights from our research experts on making better decisions for your function and organization.

**The 4-Step Approach to Implement an Agile Talent Management Strategy**

**Use Data-Driven Skills Insights to Drive Digital Talent Strategies**

**3 Hybrid Work Challenges Driving Employee Fatigue**

**The Future of Work: Hiring for a Hybrid Workplace**

**Shape Your Future Workforce With Skills-Based Talent Acquisition**

# Get More.

Get actionable, objective insight to deliver on your most critical priorities. Our expert guidance and tools enable faster, smarter decisions and stronger performance. Contact us to become a client:

**U.S.:** 1 855 811 7593

**International:** +44 (0) 3330 607 044

[Become a Client](#)

**Learn more about Gartner for HR Leaders**

[gartner.com/en/human-resources](https://gartner.com/en/human-resources)

**Stay connected to the latest insights**

