



# Let's Talk About Mental Health

## A Survey of People Working for MINDFUL EMPLOYER Charter signatories

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## Introduction

July 2012 saw the publication of an evaluation<sup>1</sup> of the MINDFUL EMPLOYER initiative which focussed on organisations who had signed the Charter for Employers who were Positive About Mental Health<sup>2</sup>. That MSc level report made a number of recommendations for employers and for the development of the initiative. Since then, the MINDFUL EMPLOYER Council of Reference, an independent group of employers who support and advise Workways (a service of Devon Partnership NHS Trust) in running the initiative, have been taking forward those recommendations.

The Council of Reference recognised that in order to successfully support and implement the recommendations from the evaluation it would be important to gain views of employees who worked for organisations who had signed the Charter. These views would serve to both complement information being provided by employers in their Charter Reviews and serve to influence further good practice. It was also recognised that gathering such views may challenge areas of poorer work practices and policies, and prompt action to improve them. The survey would also give some indication about the overall level of awareness about MINDFUL EMPLOYER. Unlike the evaluation, which was validated by Sheffield Hallam University, this survey of the views of employees and this report of its findings are not presented as an academic study.

The survey questions were developed by the Council of Reference in conjunction with staff at Workways using the web-based Survey Monkey facility ([www.surveymonkey.co.uk](http://www.surveymonkey.co.uk)) through an account held by Devon Partnership NHS Trust. It was decided that the survey would be completely anonymous and that neither respondents nor their employer would be identifiable. Providing this assurance was expected to enable a greater level of response and openness in the comments provided. It was decided to send the Survey to employers who were a current Charter signatory of more than six months standing<sup>3</sup>. Preceded by an explanatory e-mail the day before, an e-mail containing the survey link was sent to the contact person for each employer on 18 September 2013. This went to 578 employers who between them employed approximately 1.3 million people. The Survey was open to contributions from 18 September to 31 October 2013.

## Main Survey Findings

- **In organisations who are Charter signatories, 3 in 5 employees have talked to their manager about a current mental health condition, suggesting increased confidence in being able to disclose such issues now compared with in the past.**
- **The survey shows that the most likely response to talking about a mental health condition is one where the manager listens, is supportive and is understanding – and not the negative response often feared.**
- **The survey indicates that Charter signatories can do more to raise the profile of their commitment and is indicative of a link between awareness of the Charter commitment and the ability to talk about mental health.**

Being a Charter signatory is a long-term commitment. It takes time to change workplace attitudes and cultures and this survey indicates that such change is taking place.

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<sup>1</sup> FROST, R. (2012) Mindful Employer: Improving employer support for staff with mental health conditions. Exeter, Devon. Devon Partnership NHS Trust. <http://www.mindfulemployer.net/business/difference/>

<sup>2</sup> For more information about this voluntary, aspirational commitment visit [www.mindfulemployer.net/charter](http://www.mindfulemployer.net/charter)

<sup>3</sup> i.e. employers who had signed the Charter between 15 October 2004 and 17 March 2013 and were a current signatory as at 17 September 2013.

## Survey Responses

**2,671 people** started the survey with 94% completing it. A small number of employers informed Workways that they had sent the survey out to their staff but, because of the anonymous nature of the survey, it is not known how many of the 578 organisations actually did so. Reflecting the voluntary nature of MINDFUL EMPLOYER as a whole, it was up to each individual employer to decide whether or not to action the request to send out the survey to their workforce.

All percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number. The survey allowed respondents the option to add free text in response to three of the questions (as shown in Appendix 1). Between 250-300 people took this opportunity to add further comments. While, perhaps predictably, the majority of these free text comments reflected bad experiences and were critical of past and present employers, others did record examples of good practice. A sample of comments are included in this report, shown in italics.

**67% (n=1,792) respondents stated they had personally experienced a mental health condition.** 1,217 stated this was in the past and 794 were currently experiencing difficulties. 214 had both past and current issues. 63% of the 970 managers who completed the survey had experienced a mental health condition themselves.

## Awareness of Charter Commitment

One aim of the Survey was to determine how many employees of Charter signatories knew that their employer had made this commitment.

Since it began, MINDFUL EMPLOYER has acknowledged the long-term, generational nature of cultural change in workplaces and this is fundamental to its voluntary, aspirational approach. With this in mind and from information gained from Charter Reviews and general feedback, it had been anticipated that the level of awareness of Charter commitment would not be high and the survey has borne this out to an extent:

**40% respondents knew their employer was a signatory before receiving the survey request.**

76% of those who knew their employer was a signatory had seen the logo. Of the total number of respondents, 28% had seen the MINDFUL EMPLOYER logo in or on materials associated with their workplace; 14% had seen the logo outside of work; 64% of respondents had never seen the logo. 10% did not know their employer was a signatory but had seen the logo at or outside of work.

Comparing the levels of awareness across the sectors and sizes of organisations<sup>4</sup> the survey found the following:

Sector	Aware employer is a signatory	Size (No. employees)	Aware employer is a signatory
Private	35%	Micro (1-10)	82%
Public	32%	Small (10-50)	67%
Voluntary	64%	Medium (51-250)	51%
		Large (250+)	34%

Table 1

The previous MSc evaluation had observed that communicating the Charter commitment to all staff was a particular challenge, especially in larger organisations. This survey supports this and indicates that the larger the organisation, the less awareness there is among staff. Of interest,

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 2 for details of the size and sectors of organisations respondents work for.

though, is that there is a higher level of awareness in voluntary sector organisations. The survey found that voluntary sector awareness also decreases the larger the organisation is, but overall awareness remains at no less than 56% throughout that sector.

**The survey indicates that Charter signatories can do more to raise the profile of their commitment.**

## Talking about mental health

A survey carried out in 1996 found that 52% of people with a psychiatric history had concealed this from their employer<sup>5</sup>. Research carried out in 2010 found that 3 in 5 employees with a mental health condition felt uncomfortable about talking to their line manager<sup>6</sup>. This MINDFUL EMPLOYER survey found that half of the respondents with experience of mental ill health in the past had not talked to their then line manager about it.

This survey found that in organisations who are Charter signatories, **3 in 5 employees<sup>7</sup> have talked to their manager** about a current mental health condition.

**This suggests increased confidence in being able to talk about mental health issues now compared with in the past.**

Table 2 shows, as would be expected, that smaller organisations have a higher incidence of talking about issues although there is an encouraging level of disclosure within larger organisations where people often work in smaller teams, which may bring similar benefits to those of smaller organisations.

Size (No. employees)	Has talked to manager	Sector	Has talked to manager
Micro (1-10)	75%	Private	56%
Small (10-50)	78%	Public	57%
Medium (51-250)	51%	Voluntary	66%
Large (250+)	58%		

Table 2

Anecdotal evidence sometimes indicates a reluctance among private sector employees to disclose issues (for fear of not being paid, showing 'weakness', less reliance on sickness pay, for example). However, table 2 shows that disclosure in the private sector is almost on a par with the public sector, where, anecdotally also, it is sometimes perceived to be easier to disclose (often noted for having higher sickness absence rates and more beneficial sick pay arrangements, for example).

Together, table 1 and table 2 show that the both the highest levels of awareness and disclosure are in small/micro organisations and in the voluntary sector.

**This survey indicates a link between awareness of the Charter commitment and the ability to talk about mental health.**

<sup>5</sup> Mind (1996) Not just sticks and stones

<sup>6</sup> Rethink/YouGov poll (2010). Fear of stigma stops employees with mental health problems from speaking out.

<sup>7</sup> n=458 out of 794. 58%

Yet, despite the encouraging developments of recent years and improving levels of openness, acknowledgement and acceptance of mental health issues in society and workplaces as a whole, there remains a degree of reluctance to talk about them. For those who did not feel able to talk to their manager, the survey found the following reasons:

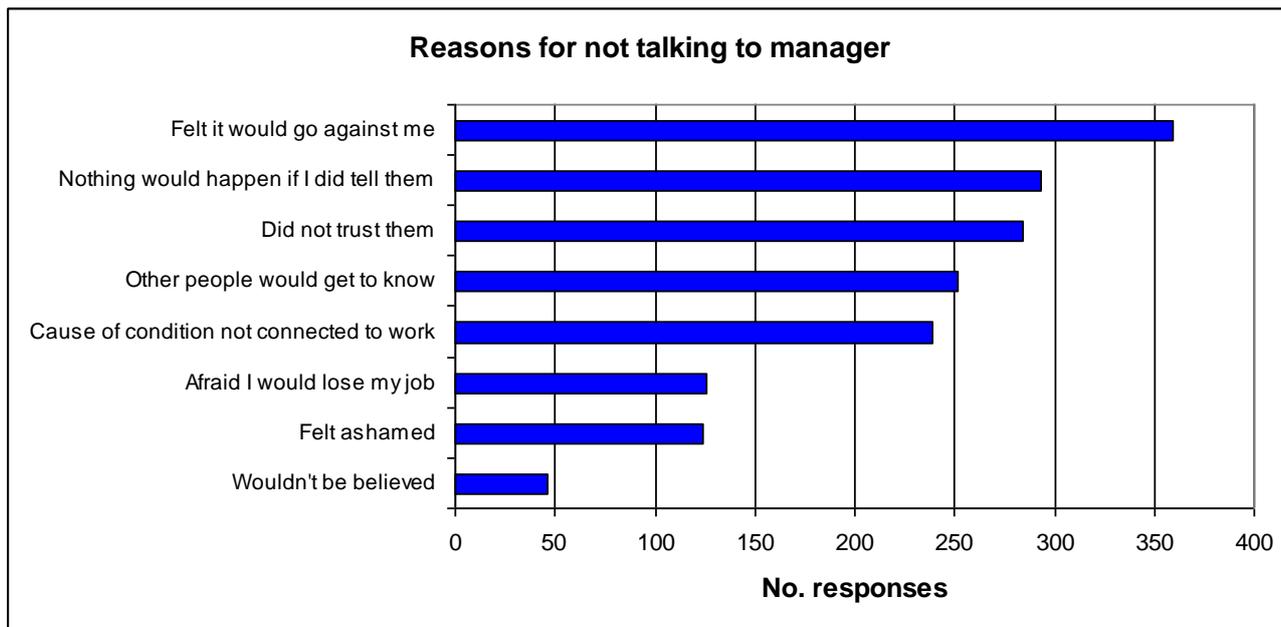


Figure 1 – respondents had option to select more than one reason

In the additional free text contributions, a number of respondents indicated they did not tell their manager because they did not consider it relevant, didn't want to, or that the issue was in the past and/or related to previous employment. A number also indicated that their manager was a significant factor in the difficulties they were experiencing.

*'I wasn't off sick, I didn't feel able to take time off as this would make my position vulnerable. I referred myself to occupational health and worked through a plan. Whilst my manager was sympathetic and drew up a series of objectives to help, these were never followed up or reviewed and it was down to myself to make sure they happened. It was a very lonely place to be and very dark days.'*

*'I did not find my manager very supportive. Although they referred me to our employee wellbeing service (which have helped far more than her), they didn't really do much else. During the time I was off work they kept ringing me and asking me when I was coming back to work. Then asked me to go into details of my sick note over the phone despite me being distressed and not wanting to discuss it when trying to recover at home. I returned to work after only two weeks when my GP suggested at least a month. I felt pressurised to return.'*

*'In my second week back in work my manager told me during a panic attack that he would get the "men in white coats" to remove me from work if I didn't go back off sick (even though Occupational Health suggested I return to work now, and I was well enough to return, wanted to return, and had already returned to work). When I told HR about it, they just laughed it off, even though I was clearly distressed and worried about this happening.'*

*'I did not feel my manager was supportive even though they followed the rules. It would have been better for me had they been more friendly. I felt they were just following rules just because they had to, not because they cared. I needed sympathy not referring to HR etc.'*

However, as figure 2 indicates, most people were met with positive responses:



Figure 2 – respondents had option to select more than one answer

**The survey shows that the most likely response to disclosure is one where the manager listens, is supportive and is understanding.**

Signposting to occupational health and other employer-provided support (e.g. employee assistance programme) is also shown to be a common response. Responses from managers also indicate that keeping in touch while off sick and help with planning the return to work were valuable interventions. The survey shows a relatively low emphasis on bringing in external supporting agencies<sup>8</sup> although experience would indicate this is probably due in part to lack of awareness or provision of such services at a local level. Involvement of supporting agencies and increased contact with someone’s GP or supporting healthcare professionals is to be encouraged. With consent of the individual concerned, involving other independent expertise can provide useful support, information and advice for all concerned.

Comparing figure 1 with figure 2 provides some valuable insights in to issues which could be termed as ‘perception vs reality’ – where fears are not necessarily borne out in what happens:

- The most common reason for not disclosing was fear it would go against them (fig 1), yet the least common response was disciplinary action (fig 2).
- The second most common reason for not disclosing was the belief that nothing would happen (fig 1), yet the outcome of ‘did not do anything’ is low down on the list of responses (fig 2).
- Lack of trust is the third most common reason for not disclosing (fig 1) yet the response of a manager telling other people without permission is second from the bottom (fig 2).

<sup>8</sup> For example, Workways, run by Devon Partnership NHS Trust, which provides an independent job retention service. [www.workways.org.uk](http://www.workways.org.uk). Details of other local services can be found at [www.mindfulemployer.net/contact](http://www.mindfulemployer.net/contact)

*'Initially my manager was of no help but (a colleague) helped me plan my "back to work" rearranging off duty to accommodate shifts that I felt capable of doing. After a more recent "blip" in my mental health, I found my manager to be much more understanding, listening and referring me to occupational health, and sometimes that's all it needs for people to be "aware" of their staff.'*

*'Had I told anyone, I think receiving reassurance that they understood, that they did not judge me and an open door if I was experiencing problems would have been all I sought. I was not confident that they would understand this could happen to anyone. I'd like to say training would help, but I think experience is the only way to really understand.'*

*'It's all about preconceptions when you're talking about mental health. I think most people have a very old fashioned view of mental health sufferers as "loonies" at the asylum and it's not that at all! Most of us are highly intelligent, compassionate, conscientious individuals that would enhance any workforce.'*

*'(My manager) discussed with me ways to adjust my work load and different ways of doing my job. Reminded colleagues to allow enough time when allocating me a task, and to allow enough time to sufficiently explain a new task, thereby reducing the stress on me. Asked me what they could do to help rather than assuming things or patronising me by taking away work.'*

While respondents identified a range of other ways in which their employer could have been helpful, both in the specific survey responses and free text comments, figure 3 indicates that a significant number felt the organisation had done as much as it could:

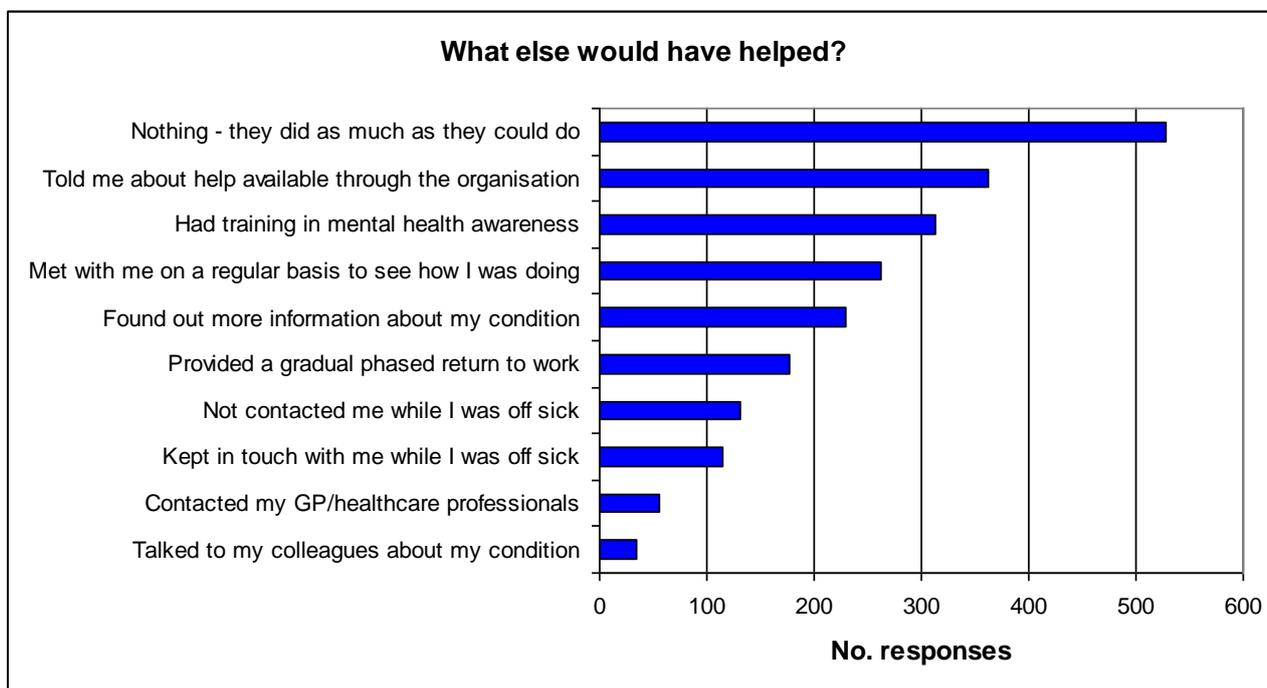


Figure 3 – respondents had option to select more than one answer

Whereas figure 2 had shown that telling people about the other help available was a common response, figure 3 indicates that this is a response that can be improved upon. As was recognised in the MSc evaluation, the need for mental health awareness training is further borne out through this survey – as is the value of having information about conditions<sup>9</sup>.

The continuing debate about whether or not to contact someone while they are off sick is reflected in the responses shown in figure 3 – although, as we have seen, figure 2 indicates that keeping in touch is a common response and is one to be encouraged. The low number of responses

<sup>9</sup> Details of mental health awareness workshops are available at [www.mindfulemployer.net/awareness](http://www.mindfulemployer.net/awareness) and information about conditions can be found at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

regarding talking to colleagues indicates continued hesitation about what other people should know and probably reflective of the general issue of disclosure and fear of what others may think.

*'(My manager) encouraged me to keep coming to work but did not expect meaningful output. Did have a tendency to take more challenging tasks which I could have done away from me. They knew me well and did the best thing for me.'*

*'Ethos in place of employment is an open door policy, and we are all aware that we can go to managers and "offload" both work and personal issues.'*

*'I was at work whilst experiencing stress/anxiety. Manager was extremely approachable and understanding. Not at all judgemental. Carried out a stress risk assessment - this was done with plenty of time allowed to complete and a full action plan devised which was followed and regularly reviewed.'*

*'My employer is very aware of mental health issues and encourages staff to ask for support help, takes positive steps to ensure that people aren't stressed. They pick up on any anxiety easily and will have an informal chat and all employees have to do a course on understanding mental health.'*

*'In our organisation you are put on review after certain amounts of absence. This can really add to stress levels and can feel punitive. It was good that my manager was willing to take a lead on NOT putting me on review, as she felt this would be counter-productive and would not help my recovery.'*

## Summary

MINDFUL EMPLOYER started as a local initiative in Exeter, Devon and has since spread across the UK and been launched abroad. With the results published as MINDFUL EMPLOYER marks its 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2014, this survey does show awareness of the initiative among employees of Charter signatories but clearly indicates that employers can do more to raise the profile of their commitment. The survey also indicates a link between awareness of the Charter commitment and the ability to talk about mental health in the workplace.

Involvement of supporting agencies and increased contact with someone's GP or healthcare professional is also to be encouraged. The need for mental health awareness training is further borne out through this survey – as is the value of having information about conditions.

Of particular note, is that 3 in 5 employees of organisations who are a Charter signatory have talked to their manager about a current mental health condition. The survey suggests an increased confidence in being able to disclose such issues now, compared with in the past, and that the most likely response to disclosure is one where the manager listens, is supportive and is understanding and is not as indicative of a negative reaction as is sometimes expected.

Being a Charter signatory is a long-term commitment. It takes time to change workplace attitudes and cultures and this survey indicates that such change is taking place.

## Appendix 1 – The Survey Questions

### Introduction

MINDFUL EMPLOYER is an NHS initiative which provides employers with easier access to information, support and training in relation to staff who experience anxiety, depression or other mental health conditions.

Your employer is a signatory to the MINDFUL EMPLOYER Charter for Employers who are Positive About Mental Health, which is a set of aspirations to help employers work towards better practice. It is not an accreditation or a set of quality standards and is a completely voluntary commitment.

We'd be very grateful if you could complete this survey it should take you no more than 10 minutes.

We want to gather views of all employees, not just those who have a mental health condition. The purpose of the survey is to enable better support to be put in place for people experiencing a mental health condition and also aid prevention. The findings will also help us to develop the MINDFUL EMPLOYER initiative.

This survey is confidential and completely anonymised neither you nor your employer can be identified by MINDFUL EMPLOYER. That level of anonymity also means that your employer is not aware that you have responded and no one in your organisation will receive details of your response.

MINDFUL EMPLOYER is run by Workways, a service of Devon Partnership NHS Trust. If you have any questions about this survey please tel: 01392 677064 or email [info@mindfulemployer.net](mailto:info@mindfulemployer.net)

Closing date for responding is 31 October 2013.

Once responses have been collated by MINDFUL EMPLOYER they will be deleted from the Survey Monkey site.

### 1. \*Before you were sent this survey, were you aware that your employer is a signatory to the MINDFUL EMPLOYER Charter for Employers who are Positive About Mental Health?

Yes  No

### 2. \*Have you seen the MINDFUL EMPLOYER logo (see the top of the page) on display, publications, website, letterheadings, forms etc?

Yes at work  Yes outside work (e.g. job adverts, internet)  No

### 3. Your employer cannot be identified do you work in the...

Private sector (e.g. business, social enterprise/social firm)

Public sector (e.g. civil service, local government, education, health)

Voluntary/Third sector (e.g. charity)

### 4. ... and approximately how many people work for the organisation as a whole?

Less than 10  10-50  51-250  Over 250

### 5. Do you manage/supervise staff?

Yes  No

### 6. This survey is anonymous you cannot be identified.

Have you experienced anxiety, depression or another mental health condition (e.g. bipolar, psychosis, schizophrenia, drug/alcohol dependency, eating disorder) at any time in your life ?

Yes in the past  Yes currently  No

*(Those who answered 'No' to question 6 had now completed the survey & were taken to the 'Thank you' page)*

### 7. As you answered 'Yes' to question 6, have you been able to talk to your manager/supervisor about your condition?

Yes  No

*(Those who answered 'No' or 'Yes' to question 7 were taken to question 8 or 9 respectively.)*

\*Answer required

**8. As you answered 'No' to question 7, please tick words/phrases which best describe your reason for not talking to them... (you may tick more than one box)**

- Afraid I would lose my job
- Cause of condition not connected to work
- Did not trust them
- Felt ashamed
- Felt it would go against me
- Nothing would happen if I did tell them
- Other people would get to know
- Wouldn't be believed
- Other (please specify) [free text box]

*(Respondents then proceed to question 10)*

**9. As you answered 'Yes' to question 7, what was the response of your manager/supervisor... (you may tick more than one box)**

- Brought in an external support agency
- Contacted my GP/healthcare professionals supporting me
- Did not do anything
- Got help from another manager
- Helped me to plan my return to work
- Involved HR
- Kept in touch with me while I was off sick
- Listened
- Referred me to occupational health
- Suggested company support (e.g. employee assistance programme, counselling)
- Supportive
- Talked with me about what to tell colleagues
- Told other people without my permission
- Took disciplinary action
- Understanding
- Other (please specify) [free text box]

**10. What else would it have been helpful for your employer to have done in your situation? (You may tick more than one box)**

- Contacted my GP/healthcare professionals helping me
- Found out more information about my condition
- Had training in mental health awareness
- Kept in touch with me while I was off sick
- Met with me on a regular basis to see how I was doing
- Not contacted me while I was off sick
- Nothing they did as much as they could do
- Provided a gradual phased return to work
- Talked to my colleagues about my condition
- Told me about help available through the organisation
- Other (please specify) [free text box]

Thank you for your time and for completing this survey. A compilation of the responses received will be published on our website at [www.mindfulemployer.net](http://www.mindfulemployer.net) after which all individual responses will be deleted from the Survey Monkey website.

If you manage or supervise staff, the 'MINDFUL EMPLOYER Line Managers' Resource' contains information and guidance about supporting employees with a mental health condition. We have also published a companion booklet for all staff, 'Keeping Well at Work' containing hints and tips about looking after your health and wellbeing. Your employer has copies of both booklets please contact us if you are unable to find out who has them or order them online at [www.mindfulemployer.net](http://www.mindfulemployer.net)

We also provide mental health awareness training for managers and staff more details are available from our website.

MINDFUL EMPLOYER is run by Workways, a service of Devon Partnership NHS Trust.

For more information please visit [www.mindfulemployer.net](http://www.mindfulemployer.net) or tel: 01392 677064 or email [info@mindfulemployer.net](mailto:info@mindfulemployer.net)

Please click 'Done' to submit your response

## Appendix 2

Respondents identified themselves as working in a particular sector and size of organisation and these are shown below in comparison with the overall sample of 578 employers who received the request for the Survey:

	Proportion of Respondents	Overall sample of employers who received survey	Size (No. employees)	Proportion of Respondents	Overall sample of employers who received survey
<b>Private</b>	16%	21%	<b>Micro (1-10)</b>	1%	12%
<b>Public</b>	63%	43%	<b>Small (10-50)</b>	7%	21%
<b>Voluntary</b>	21%	37%	<b>Medium (51-250)</b>	17%	16%
			<b>Large (250+)</b>	75%	52%

970 respondents identified themselves as a manager and 1,635 stated they did not manage staff (66 did not answer the question).