



Psychological Health & Safety for the Workplace

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### Original HMW...?

Re-imagine our relationship with work and create new ways of working and workplace cultures that support good mental health, to make life inside and outside work healthier, happier and more productive.

### The Steer

- Investigate why worker mental health is worsening – particularly for women
- Describe a future preferred scenario
- Devise first steps compatible with existing work and lifestyle cultures

### Desired outcomes

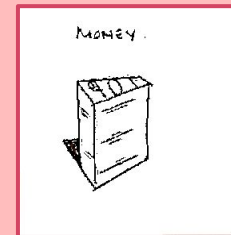
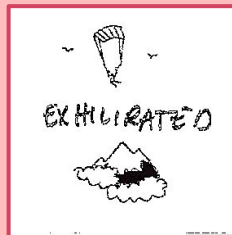
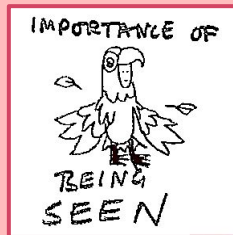
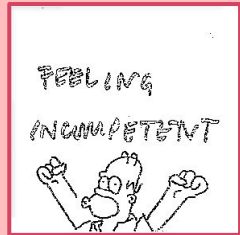
- Qualitative and desk-based research providing evidence-based insights that can inform perspectives and analysis about the current situation
- Ideas describing desirable end states and ‘first step’ solutions – these can be sketches, paper prototypes, stories etc
- Project thought pieces such as blogs and posts to be used to share thinking and progress

## Interpretation:

The team formed around common interests, most notably: The desire to take a system view of the factors contributing to the situation described in the brief. A determination to go well below the surface of the recognised symptoms and existing solutions. To some extent there was also a reluctance to set our sights on a silver bullet solution, knowing full well that the challenge we were involving ourselves with is large and complex.

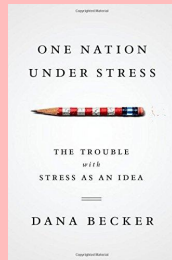
## Getting started:

Initial research covered topics such as social and psychological theories about mental health, workplace trends and gender roles. This helped to ground our thinking and produce an initial thought piece to define our starting position

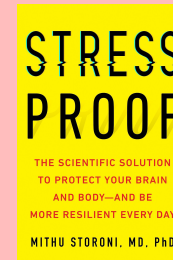
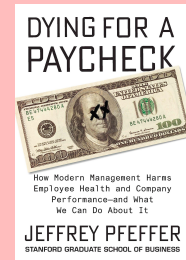
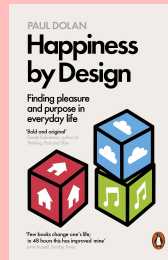


## On Mental Health & Wellbeing

Today, to talk about mental health and wellbeing is to talk about the way one is experiencing “stress”. The use of the word stress in this context is a metaphor borrowed from engineering, and these days in the same way that engineers exist to improve machines - making them resilient to any additional demands asked of them. We, through mental fortitude and training, must improve ourselves to keep pace with social and economic demands. Failure to do so exposes us as weak and vulnerable, two traits evolution has been trying to shake off - or at least conceal - since we crawled out of the slime. Over the last thirty years, tools, advice and regimes to support our improvement efforts have created a market worth billions. However, the strains of ‘modern life’ persist.



...



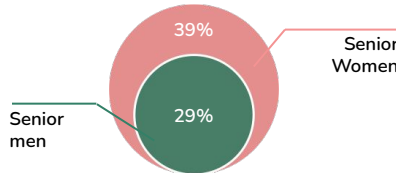
## Initial Desk Research

In the rapidly changing context of modern society and the pandemic crisis, countless workers are suffering mentally. Companies focusing on accomplishment emphasise their employees' productivity and expect them to produce the best and most efficient results. This puts pressure on the employees to produce better results, and, as a result, workers choose to overwork. This phenomenon can be found in excess in the legal and consultancy sectors, which have nurtured a culture of staying at the office constantly as a reward for a high salary. A company-focused life can lead to burnout and depression, which can adversely affect worker productivity. While many mental health support systems from organisations are being suggested to decrease employees' stress levels, attrition rates are increasing at undesirable rates.

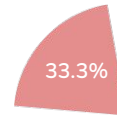
We have decided to take a closer look at the lives of women among the many mentally stressed workers in modern times. This project focused on women suffering more from mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and other problems among workers.

3x

Mothers are three times more likely to be responsible for most of the household labour



At senior-level, women are burning out at a higher rate than men



Once mothers, 3 in 10 women reduce their working hours to look after their children. only 5% of fathers do this.

According to a survey conducted by McKinsey, women were found to be three times as likely to be responsible for housework than men, and mothers account for an overwhelming proportion of those who shorten their working hours after having children. Studies have shown women feel much more responsibility towards household affairs than men, and this invisible social expectation leads to high pressure on women who want to support both their family and their career.

It also became apparent that the commonly held corporate objective to see more women in senior leadership positions is integral to wider diversity goals. However, the image society holds of the successful career woman is at odds with the image it holds of the present mother and ideal homemaker. Increasingly, women are under pressure to meet the paradoxical challenge of excelling in both areas.

## Early insights

- Law and consulting are among the most demanding professions
- A big part of business interest in improving wellbeing among women relates to a desire to see more women move in to senior roles
- For ambitious women, maternity leave and motherhood can be career obstacles

## Interviews

Having furthered our understanding of the underlying subject, we needed to talk to real people to learn more about their experiences and feelings. We looked for high pressure industries with reputations for burnout among their employees. Law and management consulting were prime candidates. Both have competitive graduate entry schemes and linear “up or out” career paths. We were also interested in listening to first-hand accounts about what employers are doing to support their employees' mental health and what technological trends are having the biggest impact on the way they are working.

We interviewed six people, two lawyers and four consultants. Five were women, while one was a man. Among the interviewees only one woman did not have a family. All of them said that they had experienced overwork at the expense of their personal life, working 14 hours from 8 am to 10 pm in severe cases, a situation that they freely admitted was unsustainable.

*“It’s an alpha-male driven type of environment, there’s a lot of pride in like hard working, having, like, bags under your eyes..”*

*“I do sometimes think that you’re in this, like, mindset of promotion is the only way and working all the time is the only way.”*

*“I, quote, didn’t have time to eat. And I found that I was losing my appetite overall, because the stress was just beyond belief.”*



Interviewees with families said that their families were as valuable to them as their careers. Parents who have children answered that they feel obligated to be a present parent and felt guilty when they weren't because of work. Even if the company tries to provide its workers with support for their mental health and wellbeing, employees avoid telling the truth that they are mentally struggling due to overwork and the collapse of the work-life balance because of a fear of being undervalued and excluded from crucial projects within the organisation.

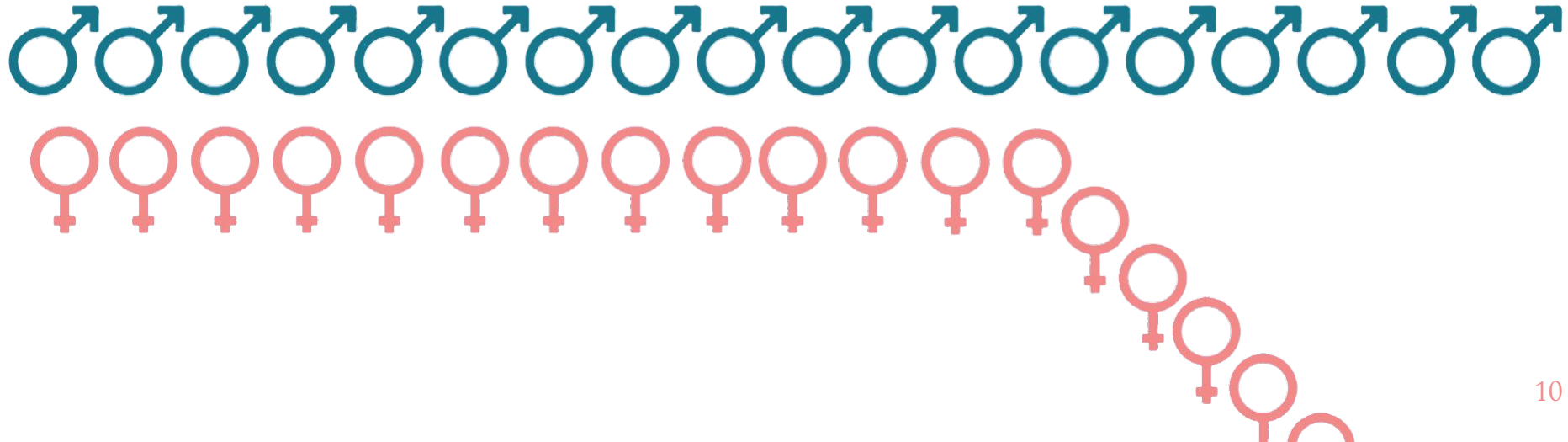
*“You know, nobody comes up with good brainstormed ideas at 10 o'clock at night, we need time to refresh and kind of have a break.”*

*“you're talking to them at like 10 o'clock at night. And they're like, Oh my god, I'm so burnt out, this is terrible. They fill out the survey and everything's green. And you're like, why did you put it all green? They're like, well, because this goes up to the management team. I don't want them to know I'm not coping.”*

## New Insights

- There is a deep fear among employees of showing any signs of struggle or vulnerability
- The support on offer is not authentic, and their struggles remain.
- There is a culture of overwork, which is driven by the desire to progress when confronted with “up or out” policies
- The workload is not sustainable long term

- There is a prevalent fear of presenting any signs of struggle or vulnerability among employees.
- The wellbeing tools presented to aid individuals are ineffective.
- Hours that might seem excessive to most are seen as a price worth paying to work on large scale impactful projects.
- Current solutions to mental health still expect individuals to fix social problems.
- The paradox between companies promoting women to senior roles, and women becoming the present mothers they wish to be.
- Motherhood is often not compatible with career progression



## Persona

We set our persona as Clare, an extreme case of our target users. Claire is a woman who works in the legal sector and is routinely overworked. She is passionate and ambitious with the goal of achieving significant heights in her field of work, but, at the same time she wants to also be present for her family.



**Claire**

Married to James



Lawyer



Mother - 1 child

*“Is this even worth it? My time is nowhere to be seen”*



Finds meaning  
in work



Finds meaning  
in parenting



Wants to  
feel belonging



Ambitious  
& smart



Zero  
work/life balance



Works 50-80  
hours a week

## New HMW...?

Through the research process we found that the problems faced by working mothers often relate to deep rooted cultural issues and cannot be fixed by interventions in the workplace alone. It also seems that the business interest in addressing these issues is closely tied to diversity goals. We decided to refocus the project on tangible barriers to good mental health as experienced by men and women, with or without children. Based on the insights we now had, a new how might we statement was formulated:



**HMW create a work culture that is more honest about the harm caused by over-work; where employees feel psychologically secure to work hard without exceeding their limits?**

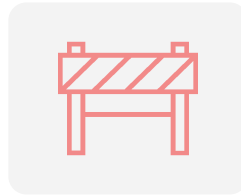


### Ideation process

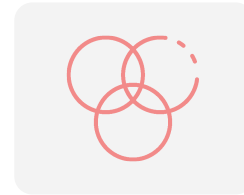
In order to take our understanding to the next level we analysed our insights and interview material further to identify the factors that contribute to the creation of a stressful workplace and the potential barriers to change. By highlighting the barriers we found common themes that could be viewed as principles. This approach led us to a framework built around nine principles. The purpose of the framework is to develop greater care for employee mental health by paying attention to specific areas of corporate culture and practice.



Insights



Barriers



Principles

## Insights

## Barriers

## Principles

1

The paradox between companies promoting women to senior roles and women becoming the present mothers they desire to be.

- Both are demanding jobs that require time commitment
- They both need flexibility and are unforgiving when you have other priorities
- Women are often secondary bread winners and bear the main duties and emotional load of the family

Valuing motherhood/diversity

Loyalty breeds loyalty

2

Deep fear to expose any struggles or vulnerabilities

- Support is not authentic and struggles remain
- Culture of overwork
- Desire to progress versus “up or out” policies
- Lack of trust

Security

Trust

3

The wellbeing tools presented to aid the individual are not working

- They are starting from the wrong place, seeing poor mental health as the problem rather than a symptom of work cultures and social norms.
- Commodification of diversity and wellbeing.

Mental health is complex

Shared responsibility

4

Hours that might seem excessive to most are seen as a price worth paying to work on large scale impactful projects

- Status quo
- Resource management practices
- Finance structures
- KPIs for the sake of profit not well-being.
- Scope creep (managing client demands)

Organisational culture matters

Systemic solutions

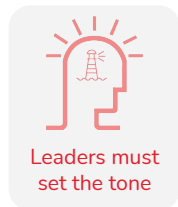
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Current solutions to mental health still expect individuals to fix social problems.

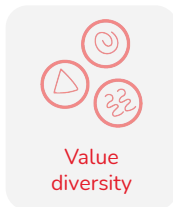
Circumstance is individual

### Refining the Framework

We conducted a survey to find out if the framework based on nine principles works properly and received responses from diverse sectors including: legal, design, engineering, events and therapy. Respondents said that 'Leaders must set the tone' was the most important factor in maintaining the framework, and 'Working within limits leads to better productivity' was not necessary. Reflecting these results, we have condensed the nine principles to six. The six principles can be divided into two main categories; Foundations and Actions



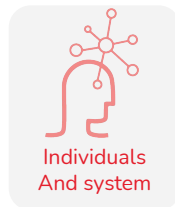
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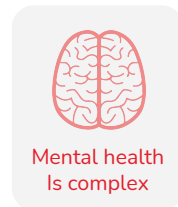
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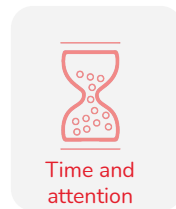
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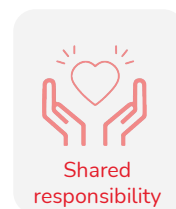
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Principles listed in order of approval rating

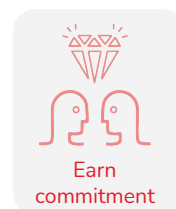
Score



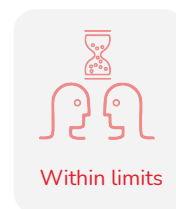
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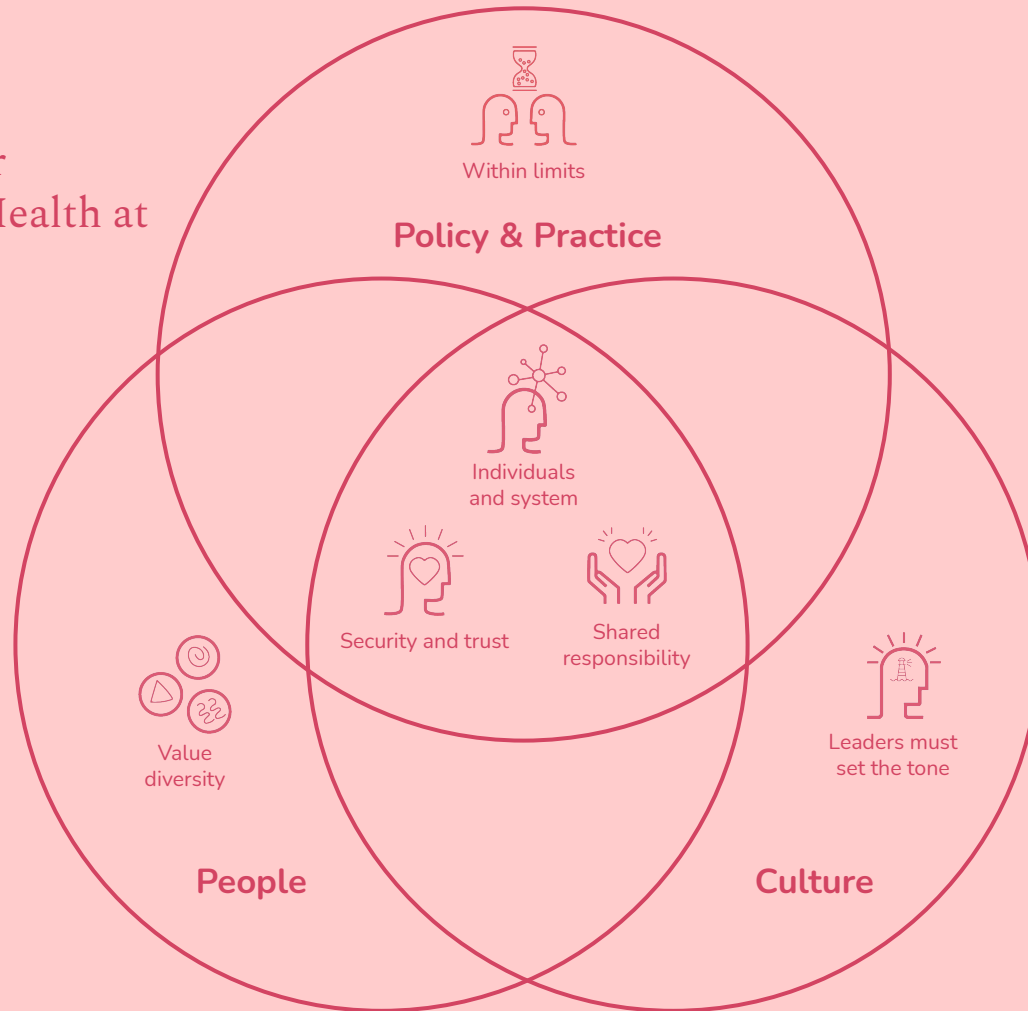


31



31

# Framework For Good Mental Health at Work



## Values

Non-judgemental  
Relational  
Trustworthy  
Reciprocal

## Shared Goal

Productivity  
Diversity  
Well-being



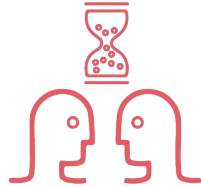
## Principles - Foundations



### Culture:

#### Leaders Must Set The Tone

The attitudes, values and practices demonstrated by leaders should be consistent with the outcomes that are desired particularly in terms of cooperation, fairness and support of well-being.



### Policy & Practice:

#### Working Within Limits Leads To Better Productivity

When stress and fatigue are kept within critical levels, decision making and focus are improved and a more successful separation of home and work life is possible.



### People: Understand And Value Diversity

For leadership to benefit from genuinely diverse perspectives it must be possible for employees who live very diverse lives and come with individual perspectives to thrive within the company.

## Principles - Actions



### Act In Terms Of Individuals As Well As Systems

Tackling causes of stress for individuals demonstrates a level of care that enforces security within the wider workforce. High level causes of stress should be addressed for broad impact.



### Good Mental Health Is A Shared Responsibility

Before individual wellbeing practices can deliver their true potential, working conditions and company cultures need to be conducive to good mental health.



### Build Security & Trust

With trust and security, team members can confidently take chances, air fresh ideas and expose their weaknesses, knowing that together great things can be achieved.

## Trends & Probabilistic Speculation

We speculated about the future from two perspectives. Firstly in terms of socio-cultural practices and secondly from a technological point of view. We looked for recent and emerging trends that could be used to plot potential directions of travel into the future.

One slightly sensitive issue we came across relates to positive decrimination. It would seem that the progress made in recent years to promote diversity at work is leading to a demand for diverse engagement teams within professional service sectors. This in turn is influencing hiring policy. Despite the numerous benefits, there is reason for caution, two points being the commodification of diversity and instances of a loss of confidence through the sense of being selected for gender or ethnicity rather than ability.

In the future, demands for high standards of wellbeing within engagement teams might inspire employers to take action on this front. Audited wellbeing metrics could become the norm. To this end, employee well-being could become a commodity, one that both benefits productivity and paints a picture of an employer that doesn't work its staff excessively hard. Taking this further, a preferred future might be one where instances of chronic stress are rare and demand independent investigations into the actions and circumstances that caused them.

For some time employers have been waking up to the fact that corporate gym membership is no longer enough. On-site yoga or meditation is now a regular offer, as are talks from lifestyle gurus extolling the virtues of eating and sleeping your way to better productivity. If you don't have time for the class, just get the app and do it during your commute. And if you still can't keep up, you must have something wrong with you!

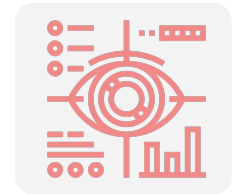
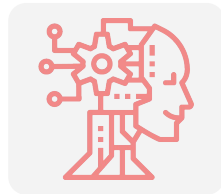
Within legal practice, AI is being embraced to complete searches and comparisons faster and more accurately than human trainees. Smart systems are proposing the language most likely to sway specific judges; another task that would previously rely on the skill and experience of professionals.

Insurance is driving the use of wearable health trackers. Consumers who are able to demonstrate positive life choices are rewarded with reduced premiums.

Integrated email and time management software now suggests when to block out time to focus or take a break.

Emotion recognition is available for land crews to ascertain how their solo nautical adventurers are 'really' feeling.

Increasingly, we are made to feel that our technology knows us better than we know ourselves.



# The Future cone

## Business practices

Plausible

Possible

Probable

Probable

Possible

Plausible

'Health tracking'  
insurance policies

Clients demand  
more diverse  
engagement  
teams

Face to face  
work becomes  
a luxury

Mental  
health first  
aiders

Insurers use  
wellbeing  
metrics as a  
risk factor

Clients seek  
assurances  
that staff are  
working  
within limits

Becomes standard  
to publish staff  
wellbeing metrics

Wellbeing  
metrics include  
peer support  
measures

Improved MH  
diagnosis and  
earlier  
interventions

Regulations to  
prevent personal  
resilience metrics  
discrimination

Independent  
investigations into  
cases of chronic  
stress

2020

2035

Blended  
work

Integrated  
AI email  
assistants

Work hours  
become  
boundless

Emotion  
tracking  
embedded into  
video calls

Cloud based  
'smart' file  
management

AI for  
contract  
negotiation

Cognition  
monitoring

AI flags  
non-pertinent  
effort

Forced rest to preserve  
medium term optimum  
working

Productivity is  
optimised,  
by micro-task  
management

Neuro-link

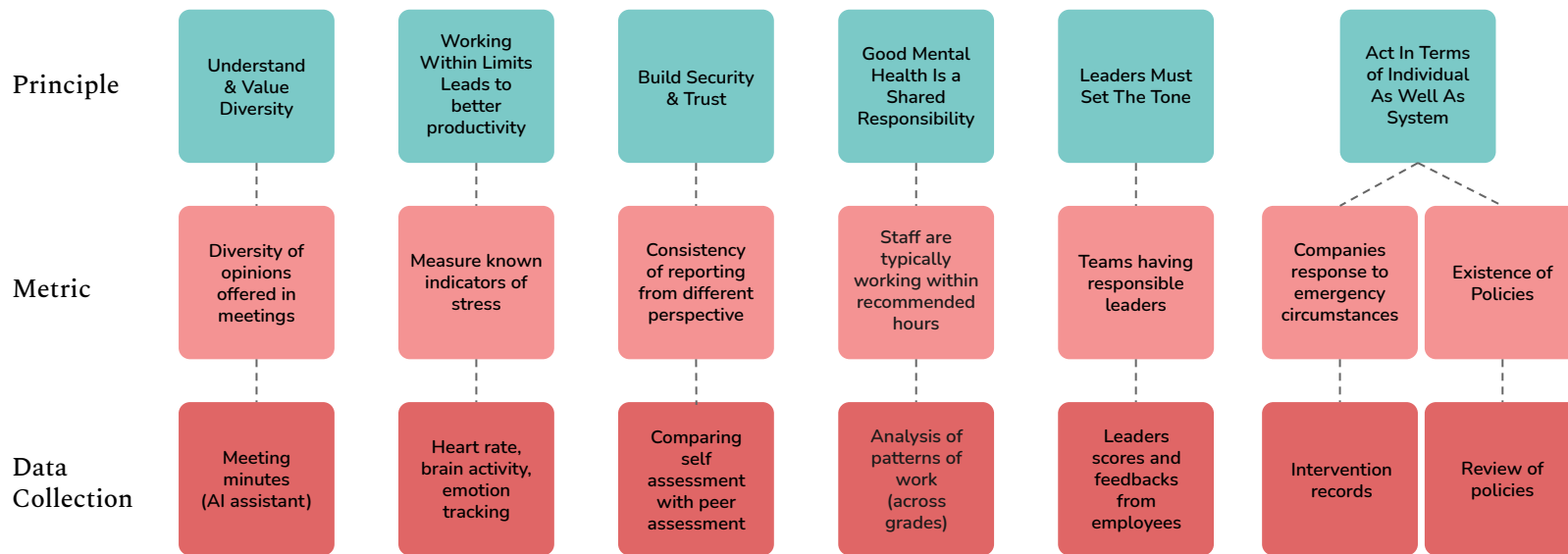
Technology  
assisted focus  
switching

## Technology

## Further Development

### Attempting to Make a service

The quality and value of tools and services are judged by the desirable impact they can be shown to have, and impact is generally demonstrated through metrics. Taking this as a starting point, we considered what metrics could be used against our principles to measure the impact of their application. With these metrics and our speculations regarding the socio-technical direction of travel in mind, we considered what data could be used to create the metrics and how that data might be gathered.



## Alarm bells

It quickly became apparent that the most practical methods of data collection available feel a lot like surveillance, and if combined with trends in 'productivity improvement' we could be headed for a future in which attempts to achieve corporate objectives and address mental health issues rely on data collection for the monitoring and management of our individual actions and wellbeing. Nudges become instructions and interventions intended to maintain our condition for optimum productivity become overly prescriptive. We would be advised when and how to eat, work, exercise and recover. Stress from overwork may be reduced, but the loss of free will and high level of surveillance would become a new source of emotional discomfort.

This felt like an area to speculate further on, we imagined some scenarios that might demonstrate our concerns and developed two animations as provocations for debate.

In practice the types of technologies we wanted to bring attention to are intended to be discreet, we deliberately brought them into the open. View our efforts here: <https://vimeo.com/500984154>

***BECAUSE WE CAN,  
DOESN'T MEAN WE SHOULD***



## Animation 1: Diverse Perspectives Guaranteed!

What if we use voice recognition and speech analysis to measure and encourage diverse debate in meetings?

A device measures and responds to the accumulated diversity of input from around the table.

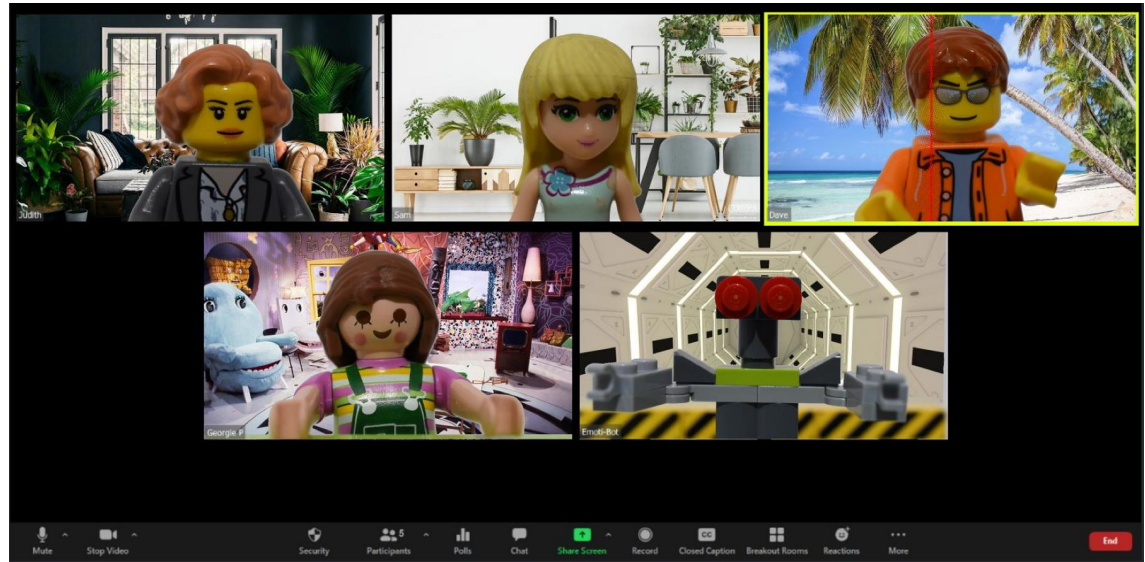




## Animation 2: Active Stress Recognition

What if we use video based emotion recognition technology to identify how colleagues are really feeling? Maybe it could prescribe help?

A robot guest clumsily performs wellness assessments and interjects with attempts to improve matters during an unrelated zoom call.



## A Positive Evolution

The animations serve a purpose in terms of highlighting some of the potential pitfalls to be avoided. However, on the face of it we still did not have a suitable first step to use our framework to set a course towards a preferred future. Resolving this step required some subtle re-framing and an analogy of sorts:

150 Years ago, losing a finger, arm or even your life during the course of your work received little sympathy. Since that time, health and safety policy has developed to demand high standards of care for the physical wellbeing of employees. Guidelines and regulations exist to prevent and avoid harm through accidents or negligence. More recently, these policies have expanded to include statements regarding psychological care. However, in practice, the rates of work-related chronic stress are increasing.

Between 2007 and 2014, 263 instances of suicide were recorded among those employed in the financial institutions of England and Wales. It is not clear exactly how much work-related stress contributed to these outcomes, however it is not unreasonable to assume for a number it was a factor. If the level of work related fatalities among rail maintenance workers was anywhere near this figure, there would surely be an outcry.

Perhaps it is time for a new discipline to emerge, one less concerned with controlling and fixing our psychological state and more concerned with curation of the cultural environments in which we work. Our proposition is Psychological Health and Safety. It may not sound as glamorous as the artificial intelligence offers we have and will continue to see. However the methodical approach used to make work physically safe, sets a good precedent for the type of approach that could successfully be used to apply the principles we outlined within our framework.

## Reflections

### What went well?

- Being a team willing to go deep into the subject.
- Having diverse perspectives to develop a well framed view of the challenge.
- Having interviewees that were willing to open up on potentially sensitive topics.
- In the beginning we approached the project as an opportunity to learn and discover.

### What were the challenges?

- When our solution emerged as a framework it became difficult to translate it into a service.
- Life events, coupled with domestic and professional responsibilities contributed to a situation where demands of the project became unsustainable for some members of the team.

### Continuation

Using the framework in conjunction with a preventative health-and-safety style approach to implementation is a strong proposition. To continue this project further the next step recommended would be to find an organisation willing to run a pilot implementation of our framework using such an approach. This would likely involve probes into existing organisation-specific attitudes and practices, followed up with workshops, training and the creation of an action plan.