



THE FUSEBOX:

2022-2023

MENTAL HEALTH IN SALES

RESEARCH WITH GLOBAL SALES LEADERS

KEY FINDINGS

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METHODS & PARTICIPANTS

- ➔ **The Fusebox conducted 27 one-to-one interviews with B2B sales leaders across the US, UK, Finland, Holland, France and Germany.**
- ➔ **Most interviews lasted over 45 minutes.**
- ➔ **An unstructured approach was used, drawing on a series of prompts to lead the conversation:**
 - › How do you define mental health in a sales context? How do you define wellbeing? Which of those terms is most commonly used?
 - › Is there a system in place to gauge mental fitness of sales individuals?
 - › What do you think are the positive aspects of the sales culture (in relation to mental health)? What are the negative aspects?
 - › How did the pandemic impact mental health in the sales context?
 - › Are there any formal supports for mental health and wellbeing in the business?
 - › If you had to make one suggestion to sales leaders to ensure the mental fitness of their sales teams, what would that be?
- ➔ **In line with the Market Research Society's 2019 Code of Conduct, we have preserved the anonymity of all interviewees.**

KEY FINDINGS



MANAGERS NEED SUPPORT TO PROMOTE MENTAL FITNESS.

Managers are woefully under-resourced to identify and address mental health challenges in their teams.

Most aren't trained on this topic and have no way to measure the mental fitness of their sales teams.

“ So yeah, nowhere near enough training ... they allude to it and say you have to take everyone on their own merit and look out for the signs, but there's no real depth ... There's nowhere near enough training that's gone on in any of the companies I've worked for.



SALES IS INHERENTLY STRESSFUL; SOME COMPENSATION SCHEMES AND SELLING SYSTEMS EXACERBATE IT.

Gated commissions and highly competitive or social comparison-based approaches may exacerbate an already stressful role.

“ ... so many plans had gates. The first 50%, you don't get paid anything. Then between 50 and 70 you get paid a small amount ... you get your accelerator and then you're paid it a hundred percent. That drives the wrong behaviour as well ... I'll defer this deal to the next month, or I'll defer this deal to the next year. I'm on accelerators, I'm at 90%, I'm not going to close this deal. It's better if I just let it roll over to next month.

Sales systems that routinize or automate selling behaviour may increase stress, hurt performance and remove the “human element” from sales. **Creativity** and **flexibility** are crucial for sustainable performance.

To alleviate additional stress from these systems, **explain “why”** they are used and help sellers understand the **benefits** they receive (e.g. more individualised coaching).

“ Reps hate putting information into CRM because it's seen as a management oversight... But if the company... said, “... this is the insight that we're going to be able to gain so I can then coach you better on certain areas so you can get better? Oh, now I want to put data in there.



SALES MANAGERS, AND THE INDIVIDUALISED COACHING THEY PROVIDE, ARE CRITICAL TO MENTAL FITNESS AND SALES SUCCESS.

Sales managers serve as a sounding board and can work one-to-one with sellers to uncover obstacles to success, leverage motivations, and inhibit panic over sales targets. **Listening** to sellers and **empathising** with their mental fitness challenges is crucial to the success of sales coaching.

Strong one-to-one-relationships allow managers to spot threats to mental fitness sooner and address them head on. Checking in with employees in an open-ended way is a key strategy.

It is crucial for managers to be **active listeners** when coaching sellers. The number one piece of advice sales leaders offered was to **listen more** and be **genuinely present**.

“ Listen to the staff. You find out everything by listening to them. Let them talk, give them an opening, a forum to talk, [where] ... you're not telling them anything. You're sitting down with them just to listen to them.

“ ... Simple to say. Maybe not so simple to do. Listen to what people are saying ... There's always a why behind the way people are behaving ... if we don't, we can never get out of that cycle of stress, and anxiety, and back to a more harmonized place of wellbeing.

Managers must **build trust** with employees, creating a sense of **psychological safety** that allows sellers to be honest and feel confident that they can be creative. Flatter structures with less hierarchy may make this relationship building easier.

“ ... it's about feeling safe, feeling secure with a sense of connection to people, to the wider environments.



MANAGERS SHOULD LEAD FROM THE FRONT IN AN OPEN, HONEST WAY.

Managers must **lead by example** and be willing to share their own experiences with mental fitness.

- “ The authenticity... and the awareness of that manager based upon their own knowledge and maybe lived experience plays a huge part in how people perceive being able to be honest about their mental health, their wellbeing, and generally how they are... if they're not even talking about it and they don't feel comfortable talking about it, it doesn't matter what tools you've got... they'll all fall flat because the perception will be that the manager's not interested in it or doesn't understand it or doesn't believe in it.
- “ I think we all need empathy, and we all need to understand where others are... I think we need to educate ourselves as leaders into the challenges of a lot of the recruits that we're bringing into the business... that would help from a recruitment perspective, a retention perspective, a wellbeing, mental health.



HEALTHY SALES CULTURES MUST BE ACTIVELY CULTIVATED.

Leaders must be willing to **invest time and energy** to build a culture that promotes mental fitness and success jointly, not one at the sacrifice of the other. Organisations with cultures that are **person centred** and **embrace openness** help sellers feel comfortable discussing the personal and professional challenges they face, leading to improved outcomes.

- “ I really believe that when you put your people... both your sellers and your clients at the centre of everything you do, and make everything you do about them, you can't lose, and that's how you build a culture... We don't need to have this toxic culture to be successful in sales. We can actually have a really healthy harmonized culture and grow sales.”

Collaborative compensation models (e.g., receiving credit for in-company referrals) may be one way to alleviate the stress of individual sales targets, along with a **focus on sales activities instead of sales outcomes**. Holding employees accountable for their work while fostering cooperation can decrease stress and increase performance.

- “ And we've tried to do everything so again, people aren't isolated in their own number with their own customers and their own, own, own. And they're responsible for what they do but it's part of a joint effort.
- “ ... if you drive a team mentality and the team know[s] each other well and supports each other, then that really does lead to better collaboration and better mental health of that person. If they feel like they're on an island on their own and they have to hit that target, and they can't ask anyone for help and they can't be honest with anyone, then they're not going to survive in the right way.



THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC INTENSIFIED STRESS IN A FIELD ALREADY DOMINATED BY PRESSURE BUT MAY ALSO INSPIRE CHANGE.

Pandemic stress resulted from both **logistical challenges** (e.g., filled with Zoom meetings, a blurring of work / personal life, and social isolation) but also layered on stress about the **uncertainty of the world**, the economy, and personal safety. Parents of young children faced childcare and educational support challenges.

Increased reliance on technology made it harder for leaders to pick up on subtle cues that employees were struggling.

However, the pandemic may also have **brought mental fitness to the forefront**. Leaders say they were more likely to model vulnerable conversations about mental fitness, sharing their own challenges.

COVID may make it harder to properly calibrate sales targets — different industries may have surged or slumped during the pandemic. Corrections from these impacts could lead to unreasonable targets.

“ I think this year as the market has normalised a bit more and the economic conditions have become more challenging... I think we'll see a lot more of the impact of that because people will suddenly find doing the job harder, which will compound maybe some of those risks to their mental health as a result.



MENTAL FITNESS LOOKS DIFFERENT FOR DIFFERENT PEOPLE.

Achieving and maintaining mental fitness may depend on the country, company, or phase of life employees are in. Key highlights include:

- › Young people may intentionally avoid sales careers because they are disillusioned by the hard-nosed, high-pressure nature of sales environments. They seek more work-life balance than other generations and are accustomed to more (and more instantaneous) support from others. They may also be more impacted by ADHD.
- › Young people may also be uniquely vulnerable to pandemic-related challenges, including isolation. And the return to in-person work may bring them more anxiety, especially around working in large groups.
- › Women may be more willing to discuss mental fitness challenges and may show more emotion when doing so. This could be the result of the socialisation of women to act as caregivers and to be open about their emotions. This may also explain why some men tend to try to work through stressors and not show emotional reactions. This may be exaggerated by the “macho” culture of sales that some leaders say still exists.
- › Nordic countries may embrace healthier work life balance, at least at the policy level. Leaders in France indicate stricter worker protections might impact approach to mental fitness.

CONCLUSIONS



MENTAL FITNESS IS A HOLISTIC CONCEPT THAT REQUIRES PERSONALISATION.

- Wellbeing or wellness is the term most commonly used to discuss mental fitness in sales.
- Wellbeing is **defined more broadly** than mental health; mental health is a subset of wellbeing.
 - “ *It's wider than just how you feel mentally. It's how you feel physically, it's how you feel emotionally. It's everything encompassed into one statement is what I'd say...*
- It includes a sense of **belonging and work-life balance** in the sales context.
 - “ *Wellbeing is making sure that everyone on the sales team has a place and feels wanted or valued in the role they perform.*
 - “ *... wellbeing means we are first taking care of ourselves, both personally and professionally, I encourage my team to really think about what are those pillars for you, and how are you honouring those... every single day*
- The **pandemic** has brought mental fitness into stark relief.
 - “ *I think the way I see this over the pandemic has shifted... as we've moved through this pandemic, I really have shifted my view of mental health in the workplace to be more of a medical kind of thing. Like, if you get a cold, you take care of it...*
- Anxiety, burnout, and depression are the most common mental health concerns.
- Businesses must lead from the front on this issue. Managers should be willing to share their own vulnerabilities and work to create relationships with sellers so they feel safe discussing mental fitness. Organisations must actively cultivate a healthy sales culture that is person centred and collaborative.