SAPPHIRE RESEARCH – CASE STUDY 4: SAPPHIRE COHORT WORKPLACE WELLBEING

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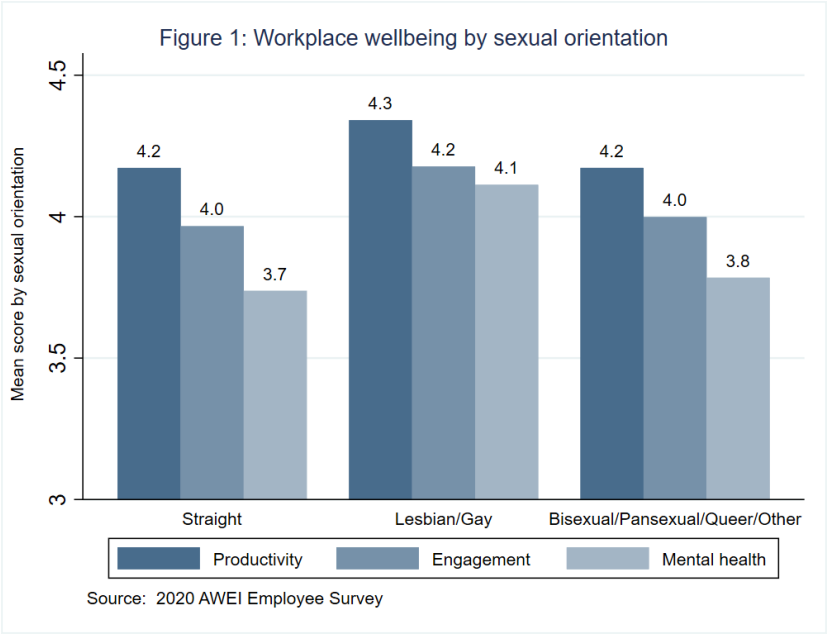
BACKGROUND

Mental wellbeing is an important aspect of a healthy and productive life. Unfavourable work environments and negative workplace incidents not only lead to psychological distress, but also diminish workers' wellbeing (Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.). Similarly, it is widely acknowledged that minority stress and stigma lead to worse mental health outcomes for people with diverse gender and sexual identities (DiPlacido & Fallahi, 2020; King et al., 2008; Valentine et al., 2018). Moreover, employees from underrepresented social groups are overexposed to negative interactions with colleagues—such as bullying and rude jokes, and this includes employees of diverse genders and sexualities (Zurbrügg & Miner, 2016). Given the stressors that members of the Sapphire Cohort face at work, gauging their mental health and identifying the factors that affect it constitute important research endeavours.

Employees' mental health has spillover effects on their work performance and engagement with the organisation (Krekel et al., 2019). Given the adverse workplace experience of employees with diverse sexual and gender identities, Lloren and Parini (2017) found that their mental health greatly impacts their performance at work and their commitment to the organisation. From the organisation's point of view, improving employees' mental health fosters a culture of high engagement and productivity at work (Hafner et al., 2015). Indeed, a stronger focus on the wellbeing of employees with diverse genders and sexualities could help organisations reduce employee stress, enhance performance, minimise absences, and improve retention (Bozani et al., 2020). Hence, employees' mental wellness matters not only for the economic prospects of the organisation but also for the career outcomes of employees with diverse gender and sexual identities.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, n.d.), workplace wellbeing *"relates to all aspects of working life, from the quality and safety of the physical environment, to how workers feel about their work, their working environment, the climate at work and work organization"*. Thus, mental health amongst Sapphire employees should be studied in conjunction with productivity and engagement. This research brief accomplishes this, examining the mental health, productivity and work engagement of the Sapphire Cohort. In line with the ILO's definition, we capture *workplace wellbeing* by considering employees' answers to survey questions on their mental health at work, productivity and engagement with the organisation.

WORKPLACE WELLBEING



This case study utilises data from the 2020 AWEI Employee Survey. The Sapphire Cohort sample consists of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) people who identify or may be perceived as women in the workplace (*n*=3,087). This includes cisgender women, transgender women, and non-binary people who may be perceived as female or feminine (regardless of their gender identities).

Figure 1 depicts differences in the mean scores for mental health, productivity and engagement by employees' sexual orientation. We find that employees who identify as lesbian or gay report slightly higher levels of mental health, productivity and engagement than employees who identify as straight, bisexual, pansexual and queer. The mean mental health, productivity and engagement scores of straight employees are similar to those of bisexual, pansexual and queer employees.

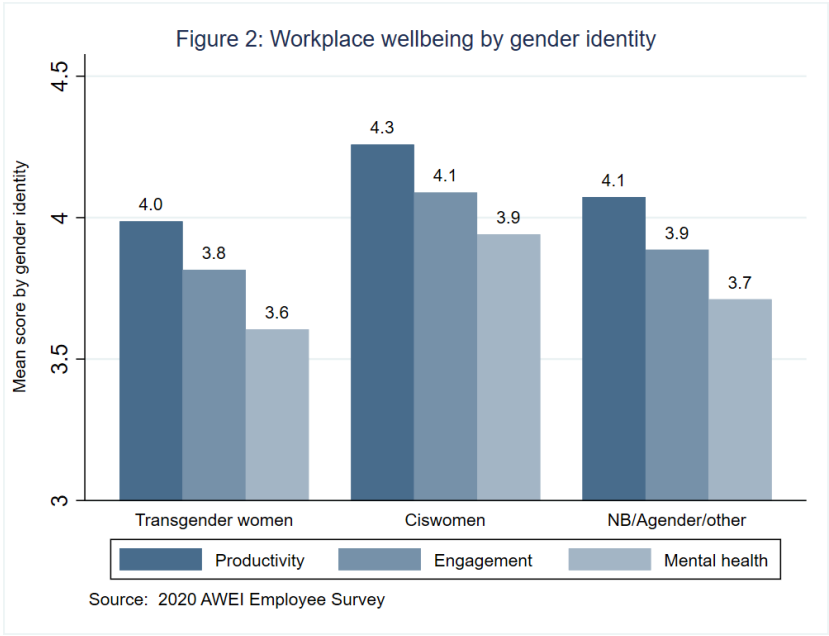


Figure 2 shows differences in the mean scores for mental health, productivity and engagement by employees' gender identity. Cis women exhibit higher levels of mental health, productivity and engagement than trans women and those who identify as non-binary and agender. Trans women report the lowest mean scores for all three indicators of workplace wellbeing amongst the three groups.

Overall, the figures reveal that employees from diverse sexual and gender identity groups within the Sapphire Cohort report high levels of mental health, productivity and engagement. However, these statistics do not take into account individual characteristics and organisational factors. While bivariate analyses (such as those presented in Figures 1 and 2) can provide preliminary evidence on how a single factor is associated with workplace wellbeing, multiple regression models can incorporate several factors at a time and account for their interdependencies. We accomplish this in the next section.

PREDICTORS OF WORKPLACE WELLBEING

To understand how sexual and gender identities impact workplace wellbeing, we estimated three regression models with mental health, productivity and engagement with the organisation as the outcome variables. Besides variables that capture sexual and gender identities of employees, age, education, being raised in an unsupportive environment,[1] being bullied and being the target of jokes[2] are included in all the models.

Table 1 reports results from multilevel ordered logistic regression models using the 2020 AWEI Employee Survey data.[3] The odds ratios give the estimated effect of a given explanatory variable on the odds of higher workplace wellbeing, as measured by mental health, productivity and organisational engagement. Odds ratios greater than one indicate that a given factor is associated with greater workplace wellbeing, whereas odds ratios smaller than one indicate that a given factor is associated with lower workplace wellbeing. Stars are used to denote those associations that were statistically significant.

Tale 1: Odds ratios from multilevel ordinal logistic regression models of workplace wellbeing

Explanatory variables	**Model 1: Mental health**	**Model 2: Productivity at work**	**Model 3: Organisational engagement**
Being the target of jokes			
No *(reference group)*			
Yes	0.43***	0.55***	0.49***
Education			
No university degree *(reference group)*			
Has university degree	1.17*	1.05	1.14
Age			
25-34 years *(reference group)*			
<24 years	1.07	1.06	1.15
35-44 years	1.03	0.99	1.08
45-54 years	1.04	1.24*	1.23*
55+ years	0.77*	0.82	0.82
Gender identity			
Cis woman *(reference group)*			
Transgender woman	0.78	0.71	0.84
Non-Binary/Agender/other	0.76	0.70*	0.72

[1] This variable informs whether the employee was raised in an environment where diverse gender and sexual identities were not accepted.

[2] Experiencing bullying is measured by a variable that takes the value one when employees report that they have been the target of bullying/harassment targeting their gender diversity or sexual orientation in the past year, and the value zero otherwise. Being the target of jokes is measured by a variable taking the value one when employees reported being exposed to unwanted jokes/innuendo targeting their sexual or gender identity in the past year, and the value zero otherwise.

[3] The specific model that we estimated was a multilevel ordered logistic regression model. Ordered logistic regression models are extensions of logistic regression models where the outcome variable can take more than two ordered response categories. A multilevel version of this model was applied to account for the fact that the AWEI Employee Survey has a multilevel structure, with employees (Level 1) nested within organisations (Level 2).

Sexual identity			
Lesbian/Gay *(reference group)*			
Straight	0.51***	0.63*	0.63*
Bisexual/Pansexual/Queer/Other	0.48***	0.60***	0.63***
Number of employees	2,485	2,485	2,485
Number of organisations	142	142	142

Notes: The models are also adjusted for bullying, being raised in an unsupportive environment, and location of work in a regional area, none of which were significantly related to any of the indicators of workplace wellbeing. Being bullied is correlated with being the target of jokes and hence not statistically significant in the models.

Source: 2020 AWEI Employee Survey

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

The regression results reveal significant variation in the workplace wellbeing of Sapphire employees. For Sapphire employees who are the *target of jokes*, the odds of reporting higher mental health are 0.43 times that of employees who were not the target of jokes. Thus, being the target of jokes is associated with significantly lower mental health. Similarly, being the target of jokes lowers the chances of feeling productive and engaged at work—with odds ratios of 0.55 and 0.49, respectively.

Education positively impacts the mental health of Sapphire employees. The odds of reporting higher mental health for those who have a university degree is 1.17 times that of employees who do not have a university degree. In relation to *age*, older employees (45-54 years old) are likely to feel more productive and engaged at work compared with those who are 25-34 years old with odds ratios of 1.24 and 1.23, respectively. Employees who are older than 55 years report lower levels of mental health compared with 25-34 years old employees (odds ratio = 0.77).

Concerning *gender identity*, we find that workplace wellbeing indicators for trans women are not significantly different from those of cis women. This is likely due to the small number of trans women in our Sapphire sample. On the other hand, employees who identify as non-binary or agender are less likely to feel productive at work compared with cis women (odds ratios = 0.70).

For *sexual identity*, employees who identify as bisexual/pansexual/queer are significantly likely to report lower levels of mental health, productivity and engagement compared with lesbian and gay employees (odds ratios of 0.48, 0.60 and 0.63, respectively). This finding is consistent with studies that report poorer mental health outcomes for people who identify as bisexual (DiPlacido & Fallahi, 2020; Dyar, 2019). Sapphire employees who identify as straight (including gender diverse employees) are also likely to report lower levels of mental health, productivity and engagement compared with those who identify as lesbian or gay—with odds ratios of 0.51, 0.63 and 0.63, respectively.

Our findings imply that we have to exercise caution when interpreting the workplace wellbeing outcomes of Sapphire employees. For one, the lack of statistical significance observed for some Sapphire employees such as transgender women could be attributed to their small number of observations. Additionally, the diverse gender experience of straight employees in the Sapphire Cohort could explain their significantly lower workplace wellbeing. As Figure 3 shows, Sapphire employees who identify as straight report lower mental health than non-Sapphire employees because of their diverse gender experience. However, the disparity in wellbeing outcomes of such intersectional groups such as transgender straight women is difficult to study due to the relatively small number of these employees in the 2020 AWEI Survey.

FEEDBACK FROM THE SAPPHIRE COHORT

To better understand the concerns of Sapphire employees who reported low levels of workplace wellbeing (i.e., scores smaller than or equal to two), we analysed their responses to the open-ended survey question asking, 'What it is like working for your organisation as a person of diverse sexuality/gender?'.

The feedback received from these employees covered many topics, including dismissal, judgement and lack of acceptance from colleagues, and disappointment in senior leadership and the organisation in general. The following quotes illustrate these points:

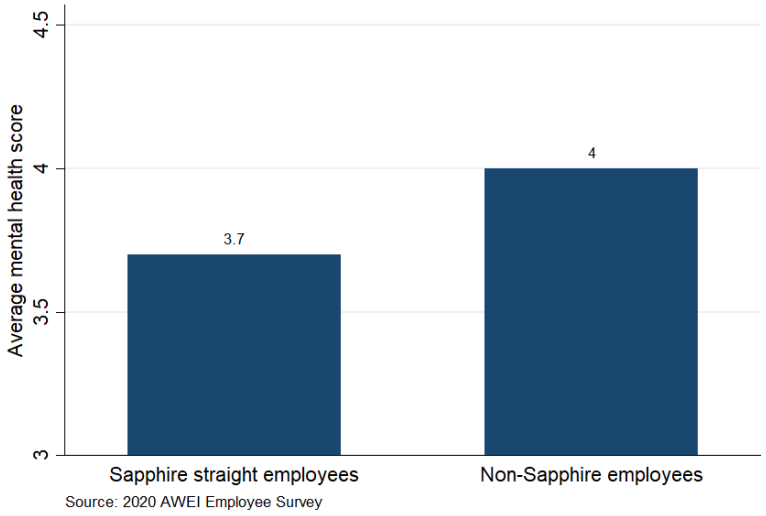
"Miserable. I work with some really bigoted people who constantly joke about my orientation and even though my boss is gay he does nothing to stop it."

"I don't really talk about it because the few times I have, I get judged or told I'm just young and things will change. No acceptance from the team or my manager for me being who I am."

"I feel like there are a few very strong voices and many silent judgers."

"Disappointing. It is largely disingenuous and riddled with reverse-biases."

Figure 3: Mental health of Sapphire straight versus non-Sapphire employees



Source: 2020 AWEI Employee Survey

The feedback also highlighted how difficult it is for some Sapphire employees to fit in the organisation and how isolated they feel in an unsupportive work environment. This is accentuated by the following quotes:

"Abject loneliness and constantly surrounded by close mindedness."

"Lonely"

The analysis also revealed that Sapphire employees look for new employment opportunities if their current work environment is detrimental to their wellbeing. This is consistent with academic research that highlights the relationship between mental health and employee turnover (Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.; Bozani et al., 2020). The following feedback highlights this:

"Often it is good, but lately it hasn't been great and I am seeking other employment."

"I am the only publicly out trans woman with any profile in my organisation. The organisation has no internal mechanism for reporting transphobic behaviour much less acting upon it. My mental health has eroded year after year working here and I am now looking for employment elsewhere"

We also find that Sapphire employees in male-dominated careers are more exposed to stigma and need greater organisational support. For example, one employee said:

"Isolating, no support and scared to ever raise an issue as it makes you an even bigger target in a male dominated profession."

Overall, these qualitative findings highlight that Sapphire employees experience distinct disparities in workplace interactions and treatment. Thus, these employees report lower wellbeing and express turnover intentions. More effort is required to improve the workplace wellbeing of Sapphire employees through stronger support from colleagues and action from senior leaders so that organisations are truly inclusive. These are all factors that could help improve the workplace wellbeing of Sapphire and other employees.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Trans women report the lowest average scores for mental health, productivity and engagement with the organisation amongst the various groups within the Sapphire Cohort. However, these differences were not statistically significant in multivariate models reflecting the small number of trans women in the Sapphire Cohort.
- Non-binary and agender employees feel less productive at work than cis women.
- Employees who identify as straight as well as those who identify as bisexual, pansexual or queer report lower mental health, productivity and engagement than those who identify as lesbian or gay.
- Being the target of jokes significantly reduces workers' mental health, productivity and engagement with the organisation.
- Employees who have a university degree report higher mental health than those without a university degree.
- Employees who reported lower workplace wellbeing articulated their difficulties and feeling of isolation and expressed turnover intentions. They called for more support from colleagues and senior leaders.

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