

# MENTAL HEALTH

and wellbeing

in the bid and proposal profession



StrategicProposals  
May 2020

# Foreword: the importance of wellbeing



Highly competitive.

Fixed deadlines.

Complex documents.

Solutions that are often ‘square peg round hole’.

Team members thrown together – who don’t want to be there, and who are juggling their bid work with ‘the day job’.

There’s no doubt that bid and proposal professionals work in a challenging environment! That’s why their organisations need to take care of them. To honour and thank them for their hard work and commitment. To create a supportive, properly resourced, fun environment. To help them develop. To give them breathing room. To watch for signs that they might need support or encouragement. To appreciate that they have lives outside work, too. Fundamentally, to ensure the right capacity and skills are in place to chase and win the right number of deals – not chasing everything, as best they can, at any cost.

I’ve seen too many people in our profession struggling – and, tragically, in some cases breaking. And it can’t go on. Mairi’s research needs to wake us up to the need to look after our staff, our colleagues and ourselves.

We need to re-set our mindset: it has to be about “life / work” balance, not “work / life” balance.

**Jon Williams CPP APMP Fellow**

Managing Director, Strategic Proposals



## Introduction

Having worked in the bid and proposal profession for 18 years, I've faced many challenges that have affected my mental health and wellbeing. Coping alone, as the only bid manager, with an enormous workload. Working for 29 consecutive hours to finish a proposal and having to deliver it before I could go home and sleep. Thinking I had to do it all or feel as if I'd failed. Having a breakdown due to overwork.

Not only are we trying to do our best in a fast-paced and unrelenting work environment, we're often dealing with life outside work too (especially in this new world amid the Covid-19 pandemic). I undertook this research to see if others had gone through similar issues, how it compared to the general workplace (was it as bad as I thought?) and was anything being done about it.

Mental health and wellbeing is an area I've struggled with personally for years. I'm happy to admit it. I've spent a lot of time looking into the subject and how it relates to me. I discovered that helping others helps me. (I'm a crisis volunteer at Shout, a text-based service for anyone who feels they can't cope.) And this survey is itself an extension of that discovery.

I'm very keen to help you deal with the workplace stress within our profession. I hope the results of my survey will help you think about how you cope with our profession's pressures. What can you do for yourself? What can you do for others? How can we, as a profession, better support every bid and proposal person during their hardest times at work?

Yes, we want to be the best bid and proposal person we can be. But it cannot come at the expense of our mental health and wellbeing.

I hope this can spark the conversations and ideas that are needed. I'd love to hear your ideas and suggestions.



Maun Mamee



## The state of our profession

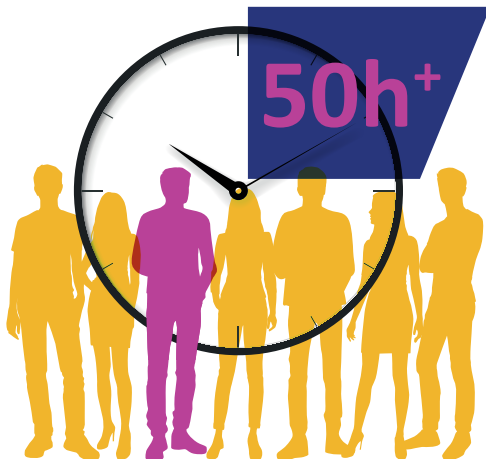
Mental health and wellbeing is a hot topic right now, nowhere more so than in the bid and proposal profession. We're at the mercy of tight deadlines, usually short. And too often there isn't a bid or proposal team large enough to deal with them.

But this isn't a new problem. Perhaps new terminology. "Mental health" and "wellbeing" are buzzwords that have taken on something of a celebrity status recently. Prince William became an ambassador for the Shout service that I volunteer for. Prince Harry has spoken out on the issue, as have many other high-profile personalities. The APMP UK conference in 2018 brought mental health and wellbeing to the fore. Tragically, most of us are aware of someone who's been unable to cope, or someone who has gone on to end their life. It's happened in our industry. When it hits so close to home it's a terrible shock.

We're also now having to deal with the additional stress of the global spread of Covid-19. A world where we must practice social distancing in and out of work has an inevitable and serious impact on us and our minds.

**We've never had a greater need of support strategies to protect and nurture the mental health and wellbeing of our bid and proposal professionals.**

**My survey results show that 88% of bid and proposal workers have suffered work-related mental health issues.**



**More than 1 in 7 proposal people work over 50 hours each week. This is not sustainable.**



**of bid and proposal workers stated that they had mental health problems due to work. This is compared to the 59% stated in the 2018 UK Workplace Stress Survey**

The 2018 Workplace Stress Survey carried out by Perkbox returned a comparable figure of 59% amongst the general workplace. While both figures are unacceptable, the disparity between the two is shocking.

Technology has had a major impact on our inability to manage stress. This is true of most professions, not just ours. We're now available 24/7, constantly connected through email, instant messaging, teamwork sites, mobile phones. It's no longer a case of closing the office door and leaving our work behind us. With the current Covid-19 situation requiring most of us to work from home, there's a sharp focus on whether there's even the need to go to an office at all.

We're an industry where more than one in seven of us work over 50 hours each week. Where 42% of us work late in the office on a weekly basis, and where 12% of us work every weekend!

We need to be able to 'shut the door' on our work and take time to relax and de-stress. How do we manage that when working from home encourages us to continue into the evening or night, without having to move rooms? It's a challenge, for sure, but one we must take on.

## Good stress drives us. Bad stress causes us to crash.

Stress has a poor reputation. But there's good stress as well as bad stress. Though they're both created by a hormone called cortisol (produced in our gut) they affect our mental health and wellbeing in two very different ways.

Good stress is released in small doses of cortisol we can surf on. It helps spur us on. That feeling of achievement as we work towards a deadline, adrenaline coursing through our bodies as we fit in a kick-off meeting, strategy calls and a bid plan all on the same day. It's what keeps us going in our bid and proposal role and a major reason we enjoy it so much.

It's exciting.

It keeps us busy.

There's a sense of achievement when you submit before the deadline; even more so when you win. This is good stress. It keeps us motivated, focused and urges us on to complete the best work we can do.

Flood yourself with too much cortisol though, and you'll play havoc with your body. Bad stress is a tsunami. It overwhelms us.

Constant overworking, constant states of stress and constant striving to meet near impossible deadlines will see your cortisol levels spike consistently, providing you with headaches, bad gut health, the inability to sleep properly, a lowered immune system, weight gain, anxiety, mood swings, depression.

Try dealing with that as you face a tight deadline!

And the longer you maintain high cortisol levels, the more serious the consequences become for your health.

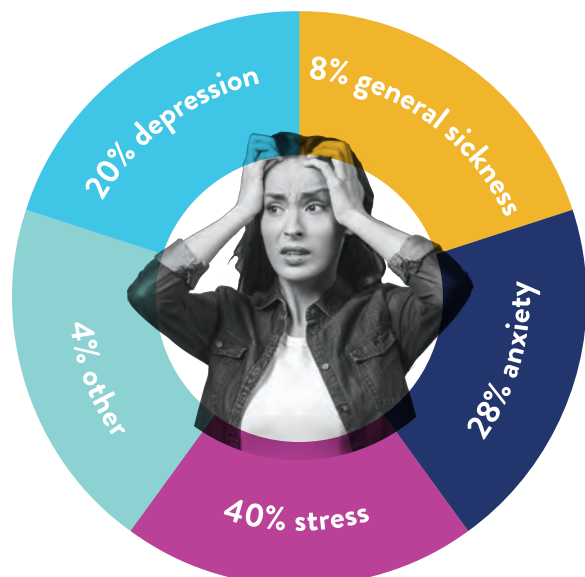
## How's stress made you feel?

Some of the impacts of stress that survey respondents experienced in the bid and proposal workspace (stated as "4% other" below) included **breakdowns, exhaustion, racing heartbeat, high blood pressure, insomnia and burnout**. None of these are easily or quickly remedied, with most needing medical or psychological interventions.

One person suffered the negative effects of stress after working FOUR days and nights straight through to meet a deadline. This shouldn't be happening in our profession! I'm sure you'll agree.

We simply must find the middle ground for stress and cortisol. Enough to help us meet that deadline, but not so much it causes health issues. It's a very fine line considering there's often an expectation that you'll keep working until the proposal is complete; or that it only needs one person to get the proposal done; or that no pre-planning or engagement is needed until the

RFP arrives; or you have multiple other proposals on the go with tight deadlines; or that some of you never get a thank you; are never appreciated for the hard work you do; and that proposals can often be seen as solely an 'admin' task.

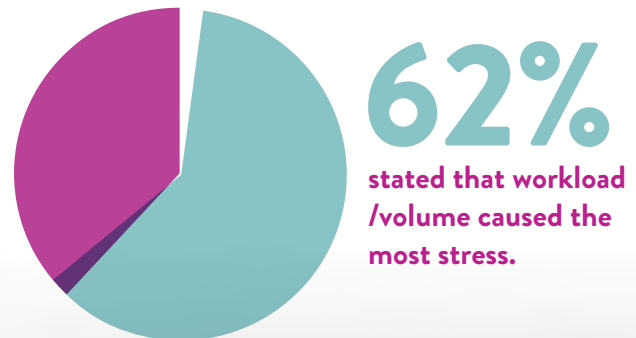
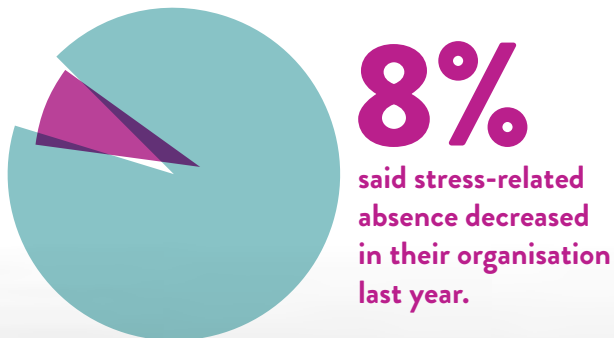




## What's being done in the general workplace?

The Health and Safety Executive published research last year which said only 8% of workplaces had reported a reduction in stress-related absence. That's despite the issue being such a hot topic. And despite mental health organisations running more workplace workshops than ever before. This seems at odds with what we hear about more companies being aligned with mental health charities, and more companies providing wellbeing training in their workplaces.

Following that, 62% then said that their workload and volume of work were the greatest stressors. A similar trend is seen with bid and proposal professionals, where workload and tight deadlines tends to be the reason for the most stress.



## What's being done in the proposal profession?

If we look at what is being done in the bid and proposal profession, we see the same disconnect but a different set of statistics. My survey reported that 62% of bid and proposal workplaces were now aligned with a mental health organisation, which is great to see! A few years ago, the number would probably have

been in single digits. 44% of your workplaces have held a mental health or wellbeing course in the last year, whether they have aligned with a mental health organisation or not.

So why are 37% of you still feeling you've no-one to talk to?

One person's view in the survey was **"It's pointless talking to non-proposal professionals, they just don't understand the role enough".**

However, when we look at the role management plays, we can see another reason for the high number who feel they have nowhere to turn to in the workplace.

**62%**

of proposal workplaces are now aligned with a mental health organisation.

**44%**

of proposal workplaces have held a mental health/wellbeing course in the last year.

**37%**

of you said you had no-one to talk to...

## Is management to blame?

60% of survey respondents felt there was someone in the workplace they could talk to if they were struggling with their mental health or wellbeing, which is great to hear. **However, of all those who reached out to management in their despair, 57% received negative feedback.** This is a shocking number!

To reach out to management when you are feeling stressed, unable to cope, or really struggling with your workload or role, takes incredible courage. The last thing you want is a negative response to make you feel worse. 34% of you felt relief when you reached out, but 20% of you felt embarrassed, and 10% felt that reaching out was a sign of failure.

The extent of that negative feedback, some of which is seen in the graphic, is even more shocking. **Bullying, anger, belittling, amongst other behaviours. Not what you would expect from management.**

Not only that, of the respondents in the 'other' group, 50% of them quit their role due to the negative feedback they received.

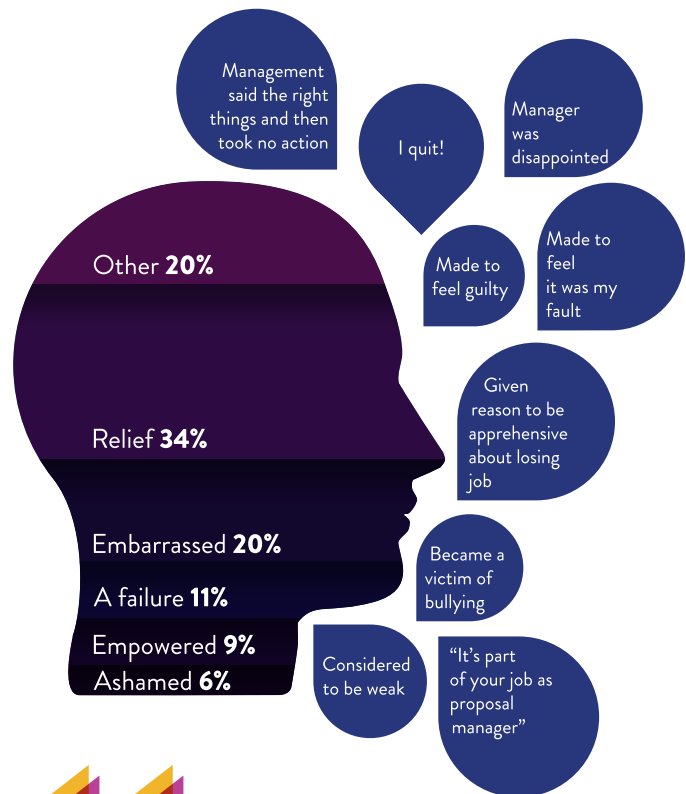


**Of the 20% of respondents who responded "other", 50% of them quit their job.**

This survey teaches us that it's not only the bid and proposal professionals that need to be aware of their mental health and wellbeing.

**Management must learn how empathy, active listening and other behaviours are essential for leading a team effectively in the workplace.**

**It's evident that management teams need the training and workshops that mental health and wellbeing organisations offer.**



Most organisations set their proposal teams up for stress, by not having the right capacity to do what the business expects them to do. How many deals do they need to support in the coming year, to support the sales organisation's new business and retention goals – perhaps categorised into large, medium and small bids? How much effort needs to be put into each deal of each category to do the job really well, without cutting corners, ensuring that the bid and proposal process creates competitive advantage and improves the team's chances of winning? Multiply it up. Divide by the number of days folks will actually do real work on the bid or proposal, aside from any other work activities. (160 or 180 would seem about right). See how big the team needs to be. And if the current team isn't big enough: that's the starting point for a really important conversation about workload volumes, or team size – because simply doing a sub-standard job that risks losing the business is in nobody's interest.

**Jon Williams CPP APMP Fellow**  
Managing Director, Strategic Proposals



# The dawn of a new mindset?



I think where these insights lead, is to a question about the balance of responsibility for change. Is it led from the top - in which case we need to focus on the behaviours, attitudes, skills, and motivators of those in charge - or will it come from a collective 'revolution' from the bottom?

Within the bidding profession, there's a 50/50 split between those managers who believe that they are responsible for the wellbeing and learning of their team, and those who abdicate this responsibility to the individual. In extreme cases, the latter 'couldn't care less' about their people.

This is reminiscent of a workhouse culture where employees are flogged until they drop.

It highlights the need for new mindsets and education at more senior levels in our profession (to appreciate the obligations for holistic wellbeing), also coaching in soft skills for those working for them (to call out and challenge unacceptable behaviour or cultures).

However, it's not all about the managers and leaders. The 'workers' are equal agents. Some adopt a victim stance, blaming someone else for their situation. Then there are those who genuinely own and drive their development, seeing opportunities to learn and do things better in every experience.

Exemplar organisations have 'guiding principles' for how they do business, where no matter how high someone escalates something within the business they will get the same answer. Perhaps this 'code of conduct' is what's required for the bidding profession?

## **Nigel Hudson FCIM CPP APMP**

Director of Bid Programmes, Babcock International Group





## How you're helping yourselves...

The hard truth is that this profession won't change. There'll always be deadlines, there'll always be multiple bids and proposals to be worked on, there'll never be enough time. So, there'll always be stress too. The ideal situation does not, and will not, exist.

Therefore, we need to manage our stress, focus on having positive mental health and work on our wellbeing.

When you've felt overwhelmed at work, many of you (24%) have reached out to those closest to you; family, friends, partners. To find the support you need you've looked outside the workplace. Did you feel you got the right support? Going back to a previous comment: "It's pointless talking to non-proposal professionals, they just don't understand the role enough." How true is that for you?

Only 5% of you reached out to a trained mental health or wellbeing professional, showing that you tend to go to those with whom you have deeper connections and trust. 5% is low considering how many workplaces are aligned with mental health organisations or have had wellbeing workshops at work (which we'll see shortly). How can we bridge that gap so you feel more at ease contacting the services that can

provide the professional support you need?

**15% of you just carried on. But how long will you just carry on for? Which statistic will you become a few years down the road? Will you be one of the people who quit? Or who had to seek medical advice? Or who turned to other avoidance measures such as drugs or alcohol? It might just be worth thinking about.**

Another worrying figure is that 9% of you turned the stress on yourself by overeating, taking drugs, or drinking alcohol to excess. More needs to be made of wellbeing and self-care for this figure to decrease in the future.

Technology is a two-sided coin. We highlighted earlier the negative impact of 24/7 availability. But there's a positive impact, too. Technology has given us easy and instant access to a huge range of tools to support a positive mental attitude. 61% of you relax by listening to music apps, while many others use wellbeing, meditation and mindfulness apps to improve your wellbeing. These include Calm, Brain.fm, Headspace, The Mindfulness app, Insight Timer. Other ideas from the survey include listening to podcasts, audiobooks, YouTube positivity videos and TED talks. So, technology can also be your friend.



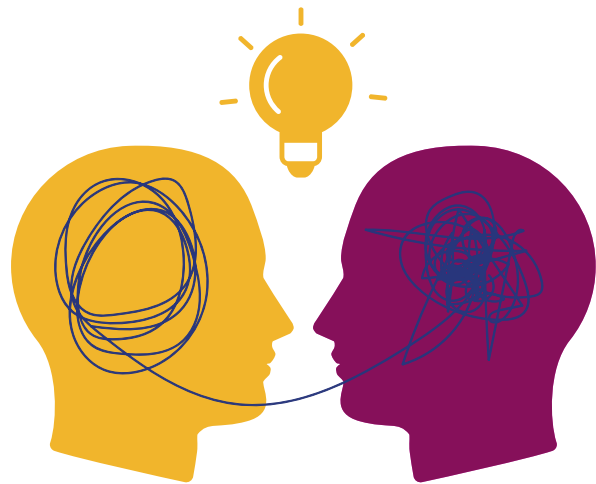
## How you're helping others...

Bid and proposal professionals are a helpful bunch. 60% of you knew where to guide people for professional help if a work colleague approached you for help. 52% of you said you'd had a colleague come to you with their issues and you'd taken the time to support them and, if you were unable to help them at the time, directed them to someone who could.



A further 72% of you said you'd consider training as a mental health and wellbeing representative for your team if your manager would allow it.

Although you felt you could support colleagues if they approached you, a massive 85% of you wanted to see a dedicated mental health and wellbeing organisation being set up specifically for the bid and proposal profession; a support group who really understands our unique issues. That's an overwhelming majority. But what would the solution look like?



# 85%

**of respondents  
said they would like  
to see a specific  
wellbeing function  
for the proposal  
profession**

There are no clear answers. But we can...



## Take care of our own mental health and wellbeing

### At home



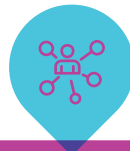
Exercise:  
running, cycling,  
swimming,  
walking, yoga



Listen to music



Download  
wellbeing apps



Create your  
personal  
support  
network



Make a list of  
contactable  
professional  
support in case  
you need it in  
the future



Look at mental  
health  
organisations'  
websites for  
free support  
information or  
available online  
courses

### At work



Start to influence and  
educate management  
in areas of supporting  
and listening



Speak up when the bid  
function is  
under-resourced



Take care of each other  
in your team



Consider training as a  
mental health /  
wellbeing person for  
your team

What do these survey results show? That there is no one clear solution? Perhaps. The fundamental issue is not going to change drastically; we'll always have tight deadlines and heavy workloads. It's the nature of the business.

But we must take responsibility for ourselves and those in our teams. And we must educate management in how to provide positivity and empathy to those who are brave enough to talk about their struggles.

And there's an onus on us to look at how our industry can provide the support it needs.

**If 85% of you want industry-specific support, will you play your part in suggesting ideas, thoughts and discussions around this?**

I am more than happy for you to contact me and help carry this initiative forward.



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