

WORKING WELL. TOGETHER.

AN AURA INSIGHT WELLBEING INITIATIVE



LAUNCH REPORT 2024



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FOREWORD

The work we do together as clientside researchers and agencies is valuable but often high pressured. And the way we do that work can make a real difference: not only to its quality, but to the well-being of everyone involved.

Over recent years, increasing attention has been placed on well-being in the workplace. It's now easier to talk about mental health at work and many companies offer excellent workplace and external support for its employees when issues arise.

But, as with physical health, prevention is generally better than cure.

The AURA Working Well Together Charter is a set of behaviours designed to mitigate some of the more stressful aspects of day to day working between clients and research agencies. Above all, it's a declaration of mutual respect and empathy, co-created by our members alongside agency partners.

We're grateful to everyone who contributed, and for being so generous with their time and their willingness to make things better. The Charter is an informal one, but one we hope will provide the blueprint for how we work together in the future. Because working well together is how we'll continue to deliver great work, strong partnerships and a valued, motivated and healthy workforce.

Ruth Hinton, Vue Cinemas and AURA Chair
May 2024



INSPIRING
INSIGHT

WHY AURA CREATED WORKING WELL TOGETHER

Despite efforts to address it, poor mental health in our sector prevails at high levels. The MRS, who are to be applauded for commissioning industry research into this as early as 2019, reported in 2022 that 83% of people working in the sector had experienced poor mental health, including stress, in the previous year. This figure has changed little since 2019 (85%).

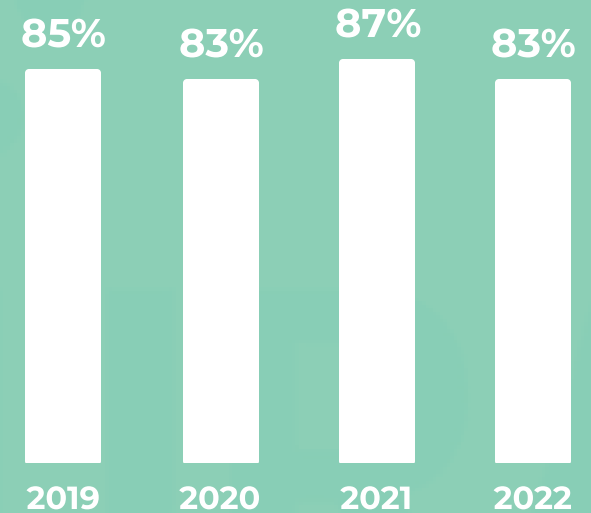
The research went on to reveal the drivers of this included having too much to do (54%), impending deadlines (47%), risks in projects going wrong (37%) and demands from clients (34%).



Many initiatives to support mental wellbeing are focused at a company level and may not always address some of the unique challenges we face within our sector. As the UK's leading network of clientside researchers we felt we were well placed to contribute to the topic.

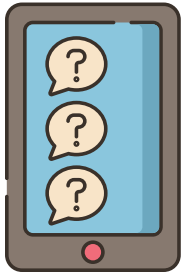
Our approach was to talk about the way we work - the agency-client model - with a wide range of AURA members and agencies large and small to see where we could help. We heard that, in the vast majority of cases, projects operate with a high level of mutual respect. But there are pinch points which can cause stress, lack of appreciation and unnecessary workload. Defining behaviours that could tackle some of these formed the basis of our Working Well Together Charter.

% reporting poor mental health, including stress, in the past 12 months



Source: Opinium/MRS Workplace Mental Wellbeing Audits/research 2019-2022

WHAT WE HEARD



The growth of ghosting

Agencies talked about the growth of ghosting, when they never hear back after sending through a proposal, even after chasing. And, even when agencies do hear back, feedback is often brief and uninformative.

The moveable brief

Briefs can change as projects progress. But we also heard many examples of briefs shifting because of mission creep, lack of communication or insufficient stakeholder sign off. All these things can impact the cost, quality and timings of a project so it's unrealistic to assume nothing has changed. It's important that agencies and clients feel they can initiate open and honest conversations about the impact of any such changes.



Proposal Pain

For agencies writing proposals is the cost of doing business. But being specific about what's needed makes the process more efficient for agencies and easier for clients to compare alternatives. Basic good practice would include a budget or budget range, the format or length of proposal needed and definitions of key terms eg what is expected in a "topline debrief".

An empathy gap?

Both clients and agencies referenced the "us and them" culture. Agencies don't always understand clientside pressures, and clients often underestimate the impact on agencies when projects are pulled or postponed at short notice. Agencies often feel in a weak negotiating position and find it difficult to say no when unreasonable demands are being placed on them.

The Need for Speed

It can feel like everything is urgent these days. Agencies have a can do attitude and will ensure work is turned around quickly. Clients can help ease pressure by briefing early and giving advance notice of when things might be needed in a hurry. And when agencies are under pressure to deliver, clients can help by ensuring nothing will be held up by stakeholders.

WHAT WE HEARD



Systems Overload

There is a lot of process involved in onboarding agencies, with clients having similar but rarely identical requirements. So much so, it can sometimes delay project schedules or even preclude a new agency from being invited to pitch. And systems can make things impersonal, a challenge if you need to speak to someone in finance to get your invoice paid.

Make Procurement Your Friend

Procurement and rosters are a fact of life. But research is rarely a commodity buy. Rosters cut off opportunities for agencies who aren't on them. Meanwhile, even if you're on one, inviting all agencies on a roster for a project can be dispiriting. Taking time to give procurement teams a better understanding of what we do could transform them from potential barriers to enablers.



Capability gaps?

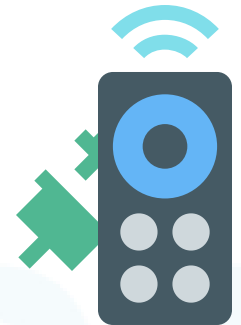
Whilst excellent training exists around research methodologies, it was acknowledged that there is little formal training on how to be a clientside researcher. This means more junior members of the a team are left to learn good - and occasionally bad - habits and behaviours from their managers. And with hybrid working on the rise, opportunities to learn by osmosis become rarer.

The Right to Disconnect

Hybrid and flexible working can lead to dispersed teams, with different working patterns and asynchronous days.

Whilst many have the freedom to work strange hours (and technology that enables it), we still need to afford each other the right to disconnect.

Understanding how, and when, each other works from the outset sets expectations, particularly around communication.



Pesky Stakeholders

The impact of indecisive, dominating or elusive stakeholders came up amongst both agencies and clients.

Challenges ranged from agencies being kept away from stakeholders to there being too many stakeholders with direct access to the agency and no one controlling from the centre. Some agencies felt that, occasionally, stakeholder stress was being delegated to them, putting them directly in the firing line. Clients have a role to play as gatekeepers on behalf of their agencies, managing situations where stakeholders cause delay or demand sign off on things.

WHAT WE HEARD

Stand and Deliver

- The traditional view is that a debrief is the final output, but that may not always be the case. Which is why getting a full understanding of stakeholder needs and communication styles up front can be invaluable
- Give the agency enough time between the end of fieldwork and debrief so they have time to do it properly. Multiple check ins can eat into that analysis time and risk postponements/cancellations.
- The debrief should be seen as a joint deliverable rather than it all being on the agency to get it right. While the client knows best how to land certain points with stakeholders, more could be done to align ahead of a debrief. Encourage collaborative interrogation of findings and challenge them. Shared ownership of recommendations or findings will always be better.
- Sometimes if you show clients a working draft of the report, they will treat it as the final product and pick holes rather than seeing it as a working document for them to feed into the narrative.
- Agencies' reputations are based on their thinking. Avoid asking an agency to spin the outcomes.
- There's excessive pushback on face to face debriefs, especially when people privately acknowledge the impact of the research may be adversely affected as a result.

After the work is delivered, make people feel proud about their contribution: share the internal reaction or feedback to a project or let them know what happened as a result of their work.

And finally ...



"Clients who ask for a weekly meeting don't always appreciate how much that eats into project time. Make sure it's included in the brief if you expect it."

"Please give agencies with whom you have a long standing relationship as much of your time as you would with an agency doing its first project with you."

"If you're finding an agency needs to be put under pressure to deliver, you may have chosen the wrong agency!"

THE SIX GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF AURA'S WORKING WELL TOGETHER CHARTER



When we ask you for a proposal, we'll respect your time



When we work with you we'll commit to open and honest conversations at all times



We'll leave you to do your best work by managing our side of things well



We'll treat you as an extended part of our team



We'll respect your right to disconnect



We'll commit to proper feedback

THE AURA WORKING WELL TOGETHER CHARTER

When we ask you for a proposal

1 We'll respect your time

- Any brief we send you will be approved by our stakeholders and ready for us to work on together
- It will include an indicative budget (or, if not, we promise to be available to discuss)
- We'll be clear about what we want in the proposal
- We'll be open about your chances of winning the business: eg how many agencies were invited to pitch
- We'll give you a reasonable time to develop your proposals and be clear on the timetable for reviewing and commissioning the work
- We won't ask for or expect a tight turnaround if we don't need one



When we work with you it'll be a partnership

2 We'll commit to open and honest conversations at all times

- We'll share our preferred ways of working and expectations before we start
- We'll agree priorities up front on how to balance speed, quality and cost
- We'll encourage you to tell us straight away if what we're asking for is impossible or ill-advised, and we'll be available for a conversation
- We'll talk about timings and budget if the brief shifts significantly and/or a project is cancelled part way in

3 We'll leave you to do your best work by managing our side of things well

- We'll do our best to be your single point of contact at key sign off moments
- We'll ensure stakeholder expectations are managed
- We'll arrange access to stakeholders where it will help the output
- We'll take responsibility for internal stakeholders delivering on their commitments to research deadlines
- We'll help make it easy for you to get paid in a timely manner

THE AURA WORKING WELL TOGETHER CHARTER

When we work with you it'll be a partnership

4 We'll treat you as an extended part of our team

- We'll give you access to stakeholders and contextual information when appropriate
- We'll be open to discussing the best presentation formats and channels and encourage face to face debriefs where we believe they will deliver greater impact
- We will never refer to you as just "our supplier"
- We'll co-own all deliverables and make ourselves available to help you shape them

5 We'll respect your right to disconnect

- We'll talk about how we work and the hours we keep as part of the kick off
- Unless agreed in our ways of working, we won't contact you or expect a reply outside reasonable office hours
- When we ask for things, we'll always tell you when we need it and won't ask for a tight turnaround if we don't need one

6 We'll commit to proper feedback

- We promise you'll hear back if you send us a proposal and tell you when we'll do that in the brief
- We'll share constructive feedback if unsuccessful and be available for a conversation if you want one
- We'll have a project wash up session at the end of every project to share joint learnings on what went well and less well
- We'll share with your team any internal feedback we receive on the project

AURA acknowledges that clientside teams may not be able to sign up to each and every one of these behaviours from the outset: cultural and organisational norms means that remains an ambition. But we are confident the signatories are completely aligned with the spirit if not every single letter of our charter

GET INVOLVED

The AURA Working Well Together is open to all researchers working clientside, not just AURA members, and we'd welcome everyone's support. We also invite research agencies to show their support by signing up as an Agency Supporter.

You can show your support for the charter by signing up as a Working Well Together Supporter on the AURA website, aura.org.uk/wellbeing.

Our website is also where you'll find a copy of the charter and the Working Well Together logo. The Charter is a voluntary code and we would encourage those who sign up to signal their support by using the WWT logo

Become a Clientside WWT Supporter

First name
Last name
Email address
Organisation name

Who are you signing the Charter on behalf of? (You may tick more than one)

Myself
 My team

I support the principles of the AURA Working Well Together Charter

Yes
 No

Are you an AURA member? (optional)

Yes
 No
 Not sure

Become An Agency WWT Supporter

First name
Last name
Email address
Organisation name

Who are you signing the Charter on behalf of (you may tick more than one)

My agency
 Myself

I support the principles of the AURA Working Well Together Charter and will help raise awareness of it amongst my clients and networks when I can

Yes
 No



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THANK YOU

AURA would like to thank everyone who shared their experiences and so honestly and freely for their contribution towards. We look forward to working well together with you all in the future!

From the AURA membership:

Allwyn (formerly Camelot)
Caravan and Motor Home Club
English Heritage
Heathrow Airport
IELTS
Irwin Mitchell
Leeds Building Society
Legal & General
Post Office
Principality Building Society
Samworth Bros
Simply Health
UKHSA
Vue Cinemas

Plus all the agencies who helped us understand their perspective so much better:

BoxClever Consulting
Citrine Research
Deepblue Thinking
Discovery Research
Flood & Partners
IFF
Kokoro
Lovebrands
Magenta
One Minute to Midnight
Quadrangle
See Research
Sign Salad
Trinity McQueen
Watch Me Think

