

Mindflick,

ADAPTABILITY AND THE PANDEMIC

Exploring individual and team adaptability
during a global pandemic



1.1

THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

On 23rd March 2020, the UK government announced its first national lockdown to curb the spread of COVID-19. This followed similar moves by governments across the world - including Spain, France, Italy, Germany, China, the US, and Argentina. India, Australia, South Africa, and many others quickly followed, and by the beginning of April over half the world's population was living under lockdown.

Life suddenly looked very different from what it once was. Busy streets were left empty. Transport hubs deserted. Our daily interactions with friends and colleagues shifted online. And many of us were left uncertain as to what would happen next. Science led the way in helping us

understand the virus at a pace not seen before. We quickly learnt more about how it spread and evolved, and even developed game-changing vaccines quicker than ever before. This has allowed most of us to return to a sense of normality. However, we are still left trying to fully understand the psychological impact such huge changes have left behind.

Most psychological research has focused on the emotional impact of the changes we've experienced ^[1]. It's provided explanations behind panic-buying ^[2], a greater understanding of how lockdowns have affected our wellbeing ^[3], and given us ways to better support individuals experiencing the effects of isolation ^[4]

and long COVID ^[5]. However, we are yet to fully understand how well we've adapted to the changes we've faced to continue to communicate, collaborate, and perform effectively.

Given the amount of upheaval and uncertainty the pandemic brought upon our lives, this unique set of circumstances gave us the opportunity to explore people's experiences, focusing specifically on the role of adaptability in the way we've responded to such widespread change. We now want to share what we've learnt from this research, shedding light on the way in which adaptability has shaped our relationships, wellbeing, and performance against the backdrop of COVID-19.

1.2

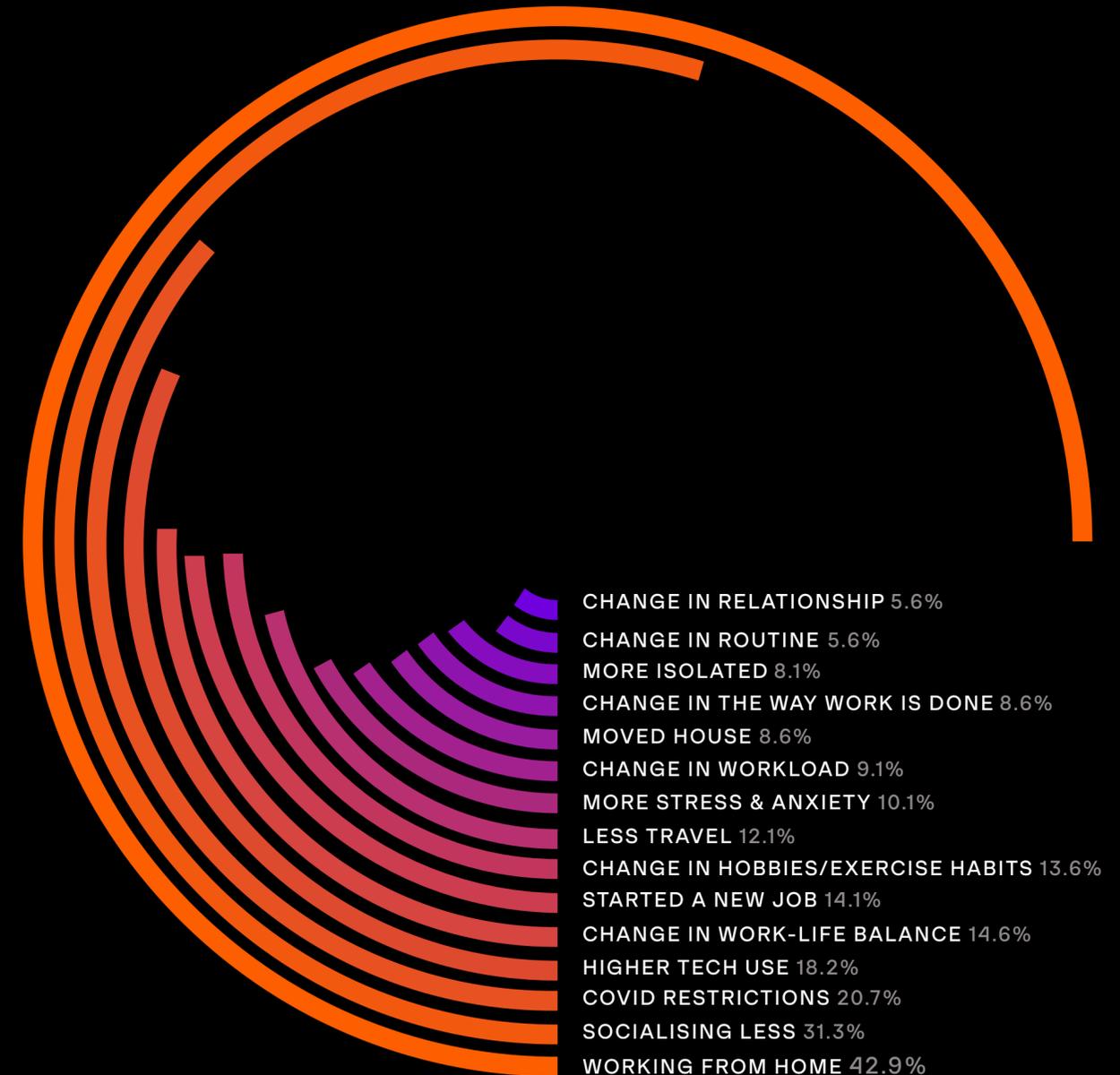
THE 3 BIGGEST CHANGES

What are the 3 biggest changes you've experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic?

We began our research by exploring the change people experienced during the pandemic.

We received over 250 different responses to this question – ranging from major life events, such as moving house and having children, to the more every day challenges. Some people framed their responses negatively (e.g., less work-life balance), whilst others were more positive (e.g., more time to exercise). Some even mentioned not being able to get a haircut and an increase in Amazon deliveries.

Whilst each of these responses stemmed from a unique set of individual circumstances, some common themes could be found among the experiences. A transition to working from home was the change most commonly highlighted – with 42.9% of people putting this in their top three. Socialising less (31.3%), using technology more (18.2%), and an increase in stress and anxiety (10.1%) featured in the top 15, with changes to work-life balance (14.6%) and different exercise habits (13.6%) also mentioned by more than 1 in 10.



1.3

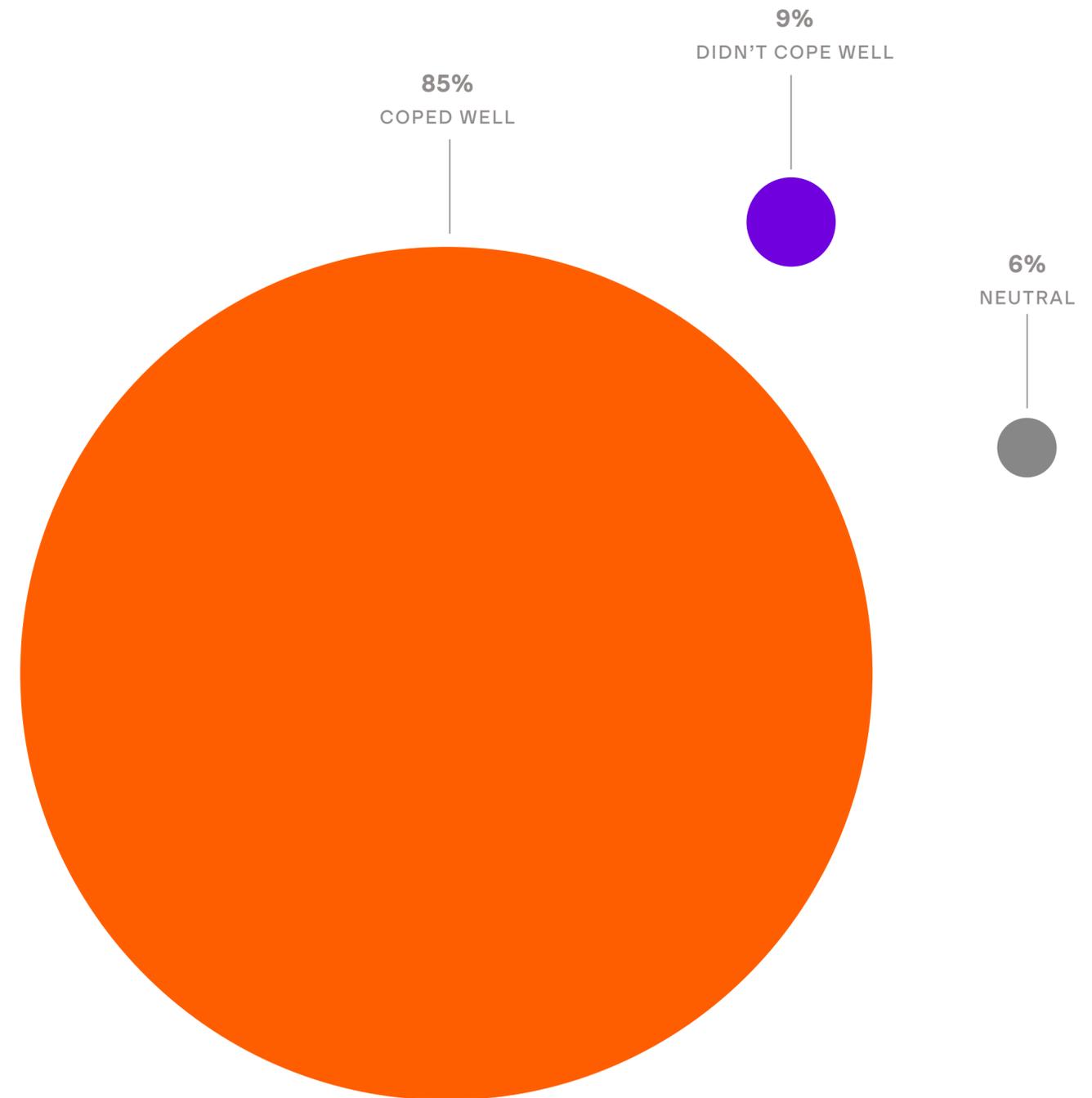
DEALING WITH CHANGE

85% of people coped well with the COVID-19 pandemic

With such wide-scale change to the way we live, it's almost inevitable that many of us will have experienced a degree of stress or anxiety (we know this since change activates the body's stress response^[6]). Under normal circumstances, many of us employ effective coping strategies to deal with everyday stressors. This allows us to navigate our daily lives effectively.

But with the scale of change brought about by a global pandemic, were people still able to positively cope with the challenges that were thrown their way?

The answer to this questions appeared to be an overwhelming "yes" - with 85% of people saying they coped well, and only 9% reporting they had not.





HUMAN BEINGS ARE INHERENTLY ADAPTABLE

At the highest level, this reaffirms the simple, yet powerful message above that has been demonstrated in social science research time and again – human beings are inherently adaptable.

This message was highlighted over and over again, not just by our ability to cope, but also in growth across a whole host of other variables over the course of the pandemic. From personal resilience (78%) and productivity (59%) to communication

(52%) and creativity (51%), more people reported a positive effect on 12 out of the 16 performance outcomes we looked at. The only exception to this came when looking at the effect of the pandemic on mental wellbeing, levels of stress, team cohesion, and workplace culture. Interestingly, these four variables are ones heavily based upon our need for social connections, perhaps illustrating the consequences of increased isolation and reduced social connection.

See below for a breakdown of the positive and negative effects of the pandemic on individuals

78%

REPORTED IMPROVED RESILIENCE

59%

REPORTED BEING MORE PRODUCTIVE

61%

REPORTED PERFORMING BETTER AT WORK



2.1

HOW ADAPTABILITY SHAPED OUR EXPERIENCES

These positive trends illustrate how we've tended to adapt to the changes we've experienced – shifting the way we think and behave to find effective ways to live, interact, and work in a brand new context.

That being said, the ability to adapt differs from person to person, and it is also something we can work on and grow ^[7]. With this in mind, we were keen to see whether different personal experiences could be explained by an individual's level of adaptability.

To do this, we split our sample into two groups: “high adapters” and “low adapters”, which allowed us to see how individual adaptability coloured our experiences of the pandemic, both at work and at home...

On almost every variable we looked at, high adapters rated their experiences more positively compared to low adapters. The only exception to this trend came on physical health – where high adapters compared no differently to the group as a whole.

What's more, these differences were particularly marked on mental wellbeing, motivation, collaboration, productivity, and resilience, whilst high adapters were also the only group to report an increase in mental wellbeing and team cohesion and a decrease in levels of stress.

This goes to show that our ability to adapt is intrinsically linked to the way we experience change – and highlights the importance of this skill in uncertain and changing times.



See below for a breakdown of how high and low adapters score their experiences in different ways



Low adapters



High adapters

91%

OF HIGH ADAPTERS REPORTED BEING ABLE TO COPE WITH THE CHALLENGES THEY FACED

62%

OF LOW ADAPTERS REPORTED BEING ABLE TO COPE WITH THE CHALLENGES THEY FACED

Individual adaptability

08

Low adapters | High adapters | Average score



2.2

TYPES OF ADAPTABILITY

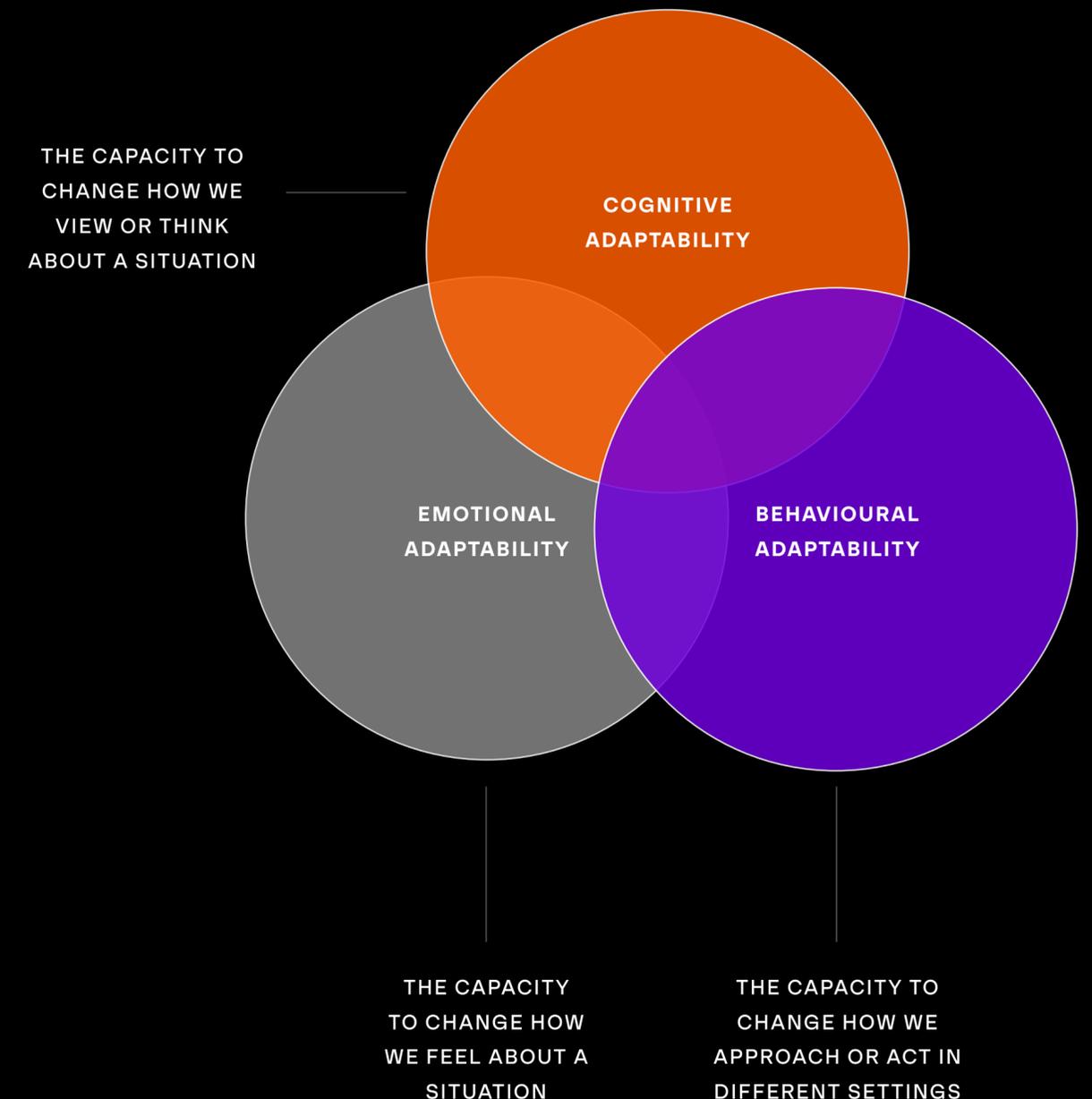
These findings highlight adaptability as an important skill to focus on when equipping people with the skills needed to navigate change in a positive way. However, adaptability is more than just a homogenous skill, and is actually made up of three unique components [8]: Cognitive adaptability, behavioural adaptability, and emotional adaptability.

Knowing this, we decided to explore how the behavioural, cognitive, and emotional components of adaptability related to different performance-related outcomes during the course of the pandemic. Whilst all three had links with resilience and communication, there were notable differences in the way they linked to the other variables we looked at.

Emotional adaptability tended to be more strongly related to mental wellbeing,

levels of stress, motivation, and workplace culture, perhaps due to the “feeling” based nature of these outcomes. This is particularly interesting when we consider how our perception of workplace culture may be shaped by the emotions we experience and whether we deal with them in a positive way.

Higher levels of cognitive adaptability tended to be associated with higher levels of productivity and creativity, highlighting a likely connection between being able to think about tasks, challenges, or potential obstacles in different ways and our ability to move tasks forward in a productive way. And finally, behavioural adaptability correlated most strongly with collaboration and communication – potentially illustrating the importance of being able to flex our behaviours to land messages with different audiences.





3.1

TEAM ADAPTABILITY

Alongside individual adaptability, team and organisational factors also have a huge influence on our personal experiences and the way we interact with others ^[9].

So next we decided to look at how team adaptability influenced people's experiences of the pandemic, once again splitting our sample into "high" and "low" adapting teams.

In doing so, an almost identical pattern emerged. Those in teams rated higher on adaptability tended to cope better with

the changes brought about by COVID, with 85% of those in highly adaptable teams coping well, versus 58% of those in less adaptable teams.

Furthermore, being in a highly adaptable team resulted in individuals experiencing more positive outcomes, particularly around relationship-based and interpersonal outcomes (e.g., collaboration, team cohesion, professional relationships) – contrasting but complementary outcomes to those more strongly linked to individual adaptability.



See below for a breakdown of how team adaptability influenced people's scores on different outcomes



Low team adaptability



High team adaptability

85%

OF THOSE IN HIGH ADAPTING TEAMS COPE
WELL DURING THE PANDEMIC

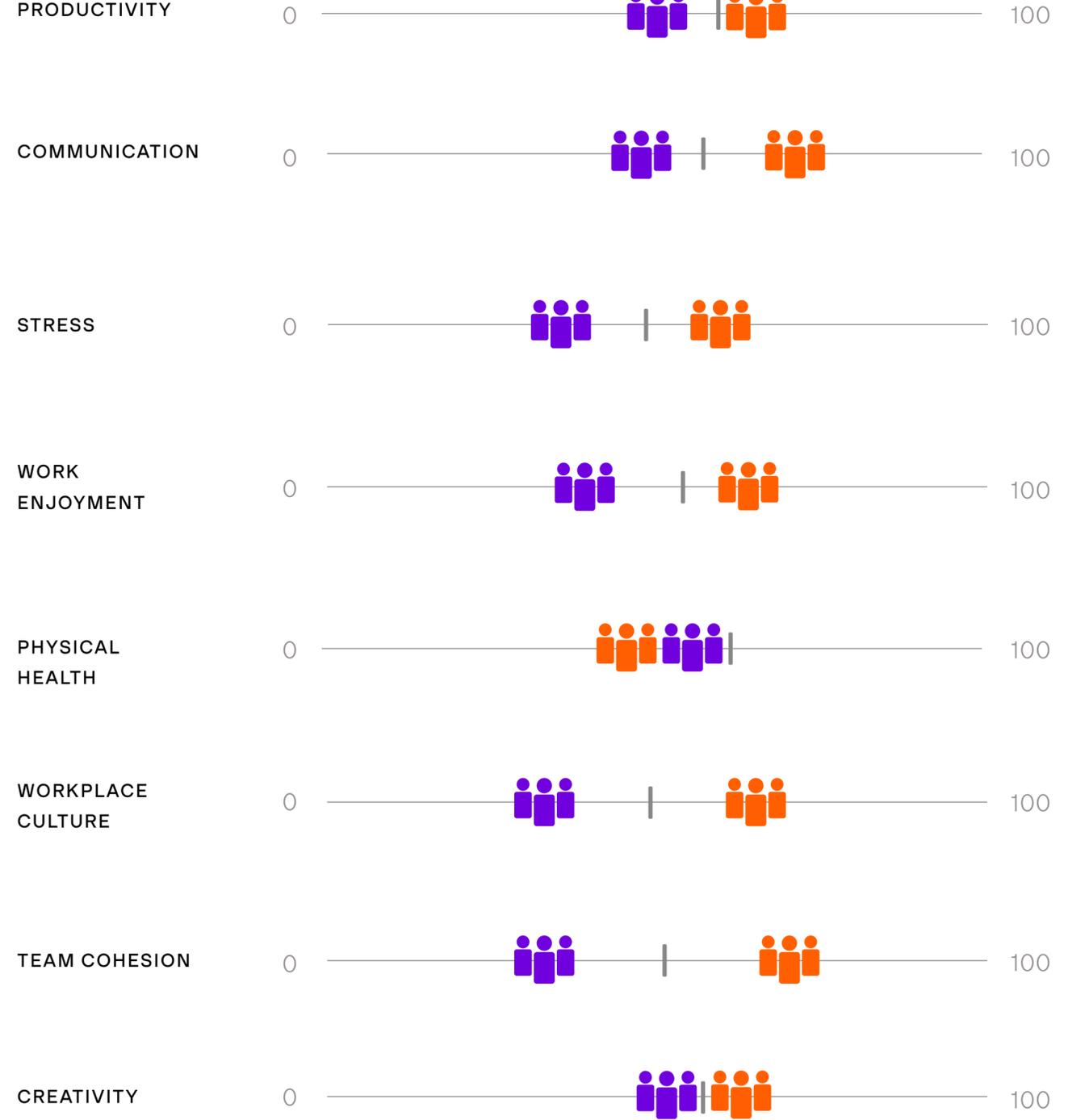
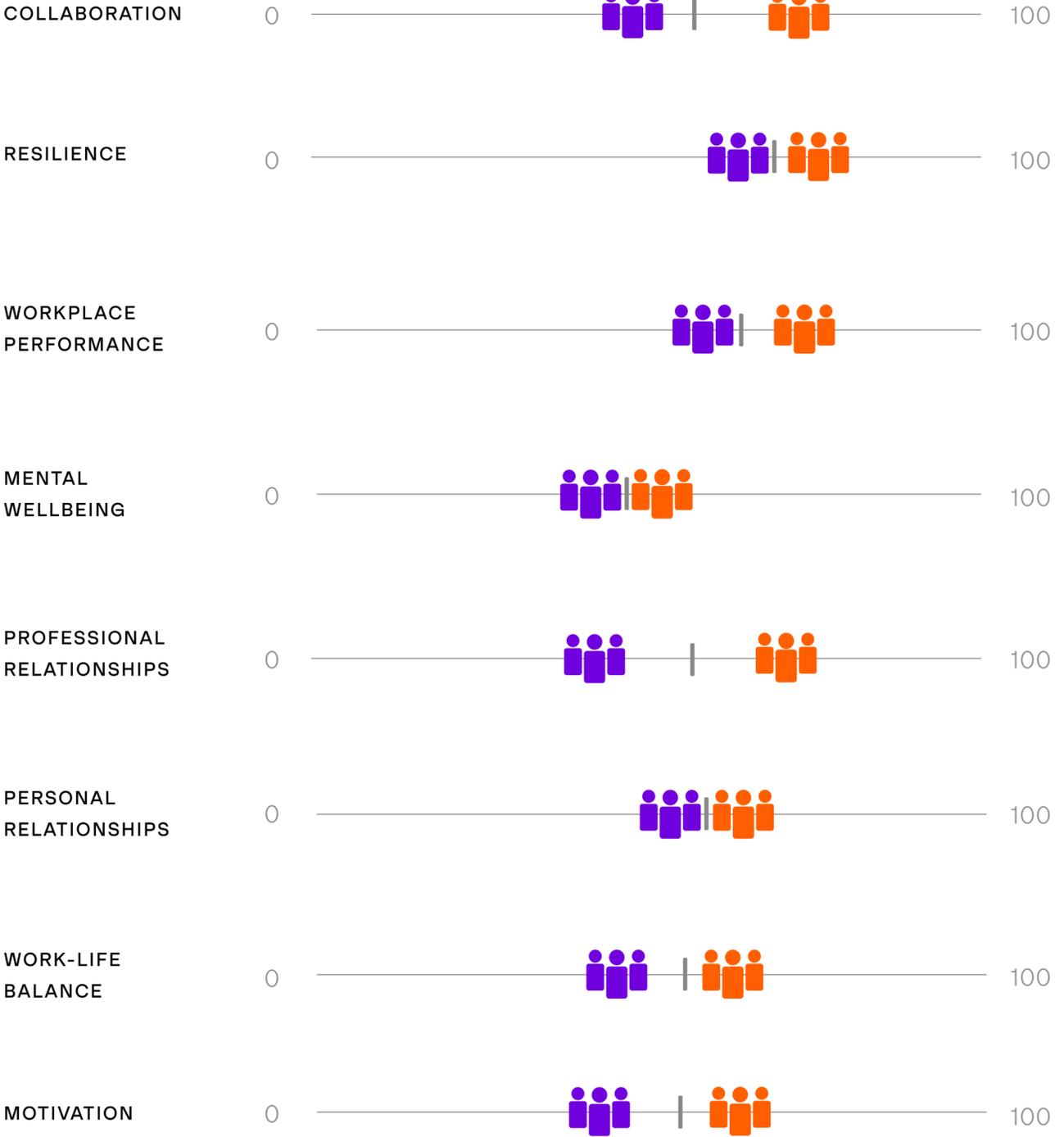
58%

OF THOSE IN LOW ADAPTING TEAMS COPE
WELL DURING THE PANDEMIC

Team adaptability

12

Low team adaptability | High team adaptability | Average score



3.2

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGHLY ADAPTABLE TEAMS

Highly adaptable teams demonstrate a number of key behaviours to help them to perform ^[10]. These include...

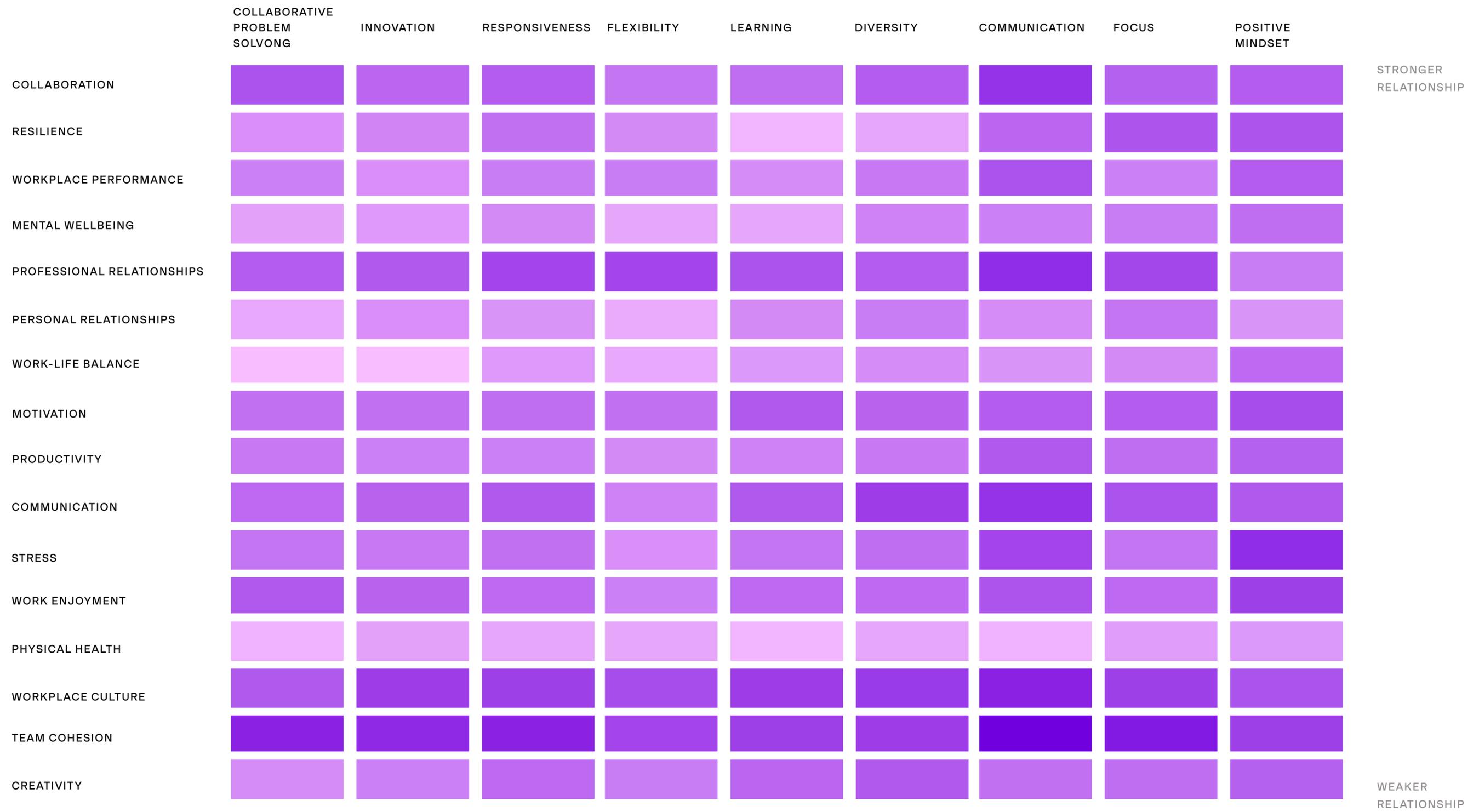
- 1 Solving problems collaboratively
- 2 High levels of innovation
- 3 Responding quickly to unpredictable situations
- 4 Flexibility in how they work
- 5 A constant drive to improve
- 6 Leveraging cognitive diversity
- 7 Effective communication
- 8 A clear shared focus
- 9 Approaching tasks with a positive mindset



See below for a breakdown of the relationship between specific team behaviours and individual outcomes.

By breaking team adaptability down in this way, it allowed us to explore the relationships between specific team behaviours and individual outcomes. In doing so, we found:

- Team cohesion related most strongly to how quickly teams respond to change, to whether they problem solved collaboratively, and to their clarity of collective focus
- Workplace culture was strongly linked to how well teams innovate and communicate
- Teams with stronger communication tended to see higher levels of collaboration and stronger professional relationships between individuals
- Team diversity is strongly linked to individual creativity
- And fostering a positive mindset can help to lower stress and increase workplace enjoyment



3.3

HOW DO TEAM AND INDIVIDUAL ADAPTABILITY DIFFER?

Both team and individual adaptability are influential in driving performance. However, their effects come in different ways...

- Individual adaptability had a stronger positive relationship with resilience, mental wellbeing, personal relationships, physical health, and creativity
- Team adaptability had a stronger positive relationship with collaboration, workplace performance, professional relationships, work-life balance, communication, stress, work enjoyment, workplace culture, and team cohesion
- Both individual and team adaptability had a similar positive relationship with on motivation and productivity

This goes to show the importance of both individual and team factors in shaping the characteristics of high performance – meaning we should focus on both when looking to build performance in our individuals and teams.

4.1

LOOKING BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

What do you think will be your biggest challenge in the next 12 months?

These lessons about individual and team adaptability are important ones as we move beyond the pandemic. In response to lockdowns and global change, many of us have found new ways to live and work – and so whilst the resumption of normality may be a relief to most of us, it won't be without its challenges. This led to us to asking people what they think their biggest challenges will be in the next year.

Much like the changes we explored at the start of our research, responses ranged hugely – from having to interact with co-workers again, to the difficulty of employing new staff. However, they could all be grouped around 5 key themes.

- 1. Personal challenges**
e.g., uncertainty, stress,
- 2. Leadership challenges**
e.g., supporting others
- 3. Team challenges**
e.g., navigating hybrid working
- 4. Organisational challenges**
e.g., recruitment and retention
- 5. COVID challenges**
e.g., future restrictions and managing the aftermath



See below for an in depth exploration of these future challenges



Personal challenges

(71 people)

- Uncertainty & stress (18)
- Maintaining a good work-life balance (12)
- An increase in my own workload (11)
- Transitions in and out of work (11)
- Working from home (9)
- Staying focused & motivated (6)
- Dealing with change (4)

Leadership challenges

(37 people)

- Supporting others through their challenges (14)
- Influencing others (9)
- Managing expectations & performance (9)
- Motivating those I lead (5)

Team challenges

(79 people)

- Hybrid working (41)
- Team cohesion (24)
- Changes to how we work as a team (12)
- Lack of clarity from management (2)

Organisational challenges

(35 people)

- Recruitment & retention (14)
- Changes to the way we operate (10)
- Economic factors (e.g.; inflation) (9)
- Learning & development (5)

COVID

(34 people)

- Dealing with restrictions & protocols (13)
- Managing the aftermath (10)
- Learning to live with it (5)
- Catching COVID (3)

These challenges are likely to require adaptability if we are to respond to them well. This is illustrated in the fact that, whilst over 75% of people reported feeling confident in dealing with the challenges they foressaw, high adapters were almost twice as likely as low adapters to report feeling confident to deal with what the future has in store.



4.2

BUILDING ADAPTABILITY

Which of the following things would help you to improve your adaptability?

Conscious of these future challenges and the uncertainty that lies ahead, our findings have highlighted the positive influence of adaptability that people have experienced throughout the pandemic. This goes to show the importance of individuals, teams, and organisations investing time in growing adaptability to help them successfully navigate change. We therefore concluded our research with one final question:

“Which of the following things would help you to improve your ability to adapt?”

The top five answers to this question included the following responses...

1

A more collaborative workspace

“

So that we can interact and work effectively with others

2

Training and development programmes

“

To learn ways in which we can adapt the ways we think and work

3

Opportunities to learn and interact with people who are different

“

To understand different viewpoints and shift perspectives

4

Greater understanding of self and others

“

So that we can understand our default ways of working and recognise when different mindsets and behaviours may be more useful

5

More flexible work practices

“

So we can change the way we work when the context shifts

These responses fit with what we know. Interacting with those who are different from us helps us to see the world in different ways, and so build a broader perspective ^[11]. Developing self-awareness can help us to understand our default way of operating and so make changes when this is no longer working. And shaping our working environment helps us to ensure our context doesn't prevent us from changing the way we approach and view different situations ^[12].

This insight offers us a starting point for ways to grow adaptability – a skill which enhances our ability to collaborate, bounce back, and thrive, as we navigate a constantly changing world.



5.1

SUMMARY

Humans are inherently adaptable

Even in times of widespread change, we often find a way to adjust the way we live and work. Our findings have shown that the vast majority of people felt they coped well with the pandemic and that they perceived positive impacts in work-related outcomes.

Emotional agility is the biggest protector of our wellbeing

High levels of emotional adaptability were more strongly related to mental wellbeing, levels of stress, and motivation, compared with cognitive and behavioural adaptability. .

Individual adaptability supercharges our ability to deal with change

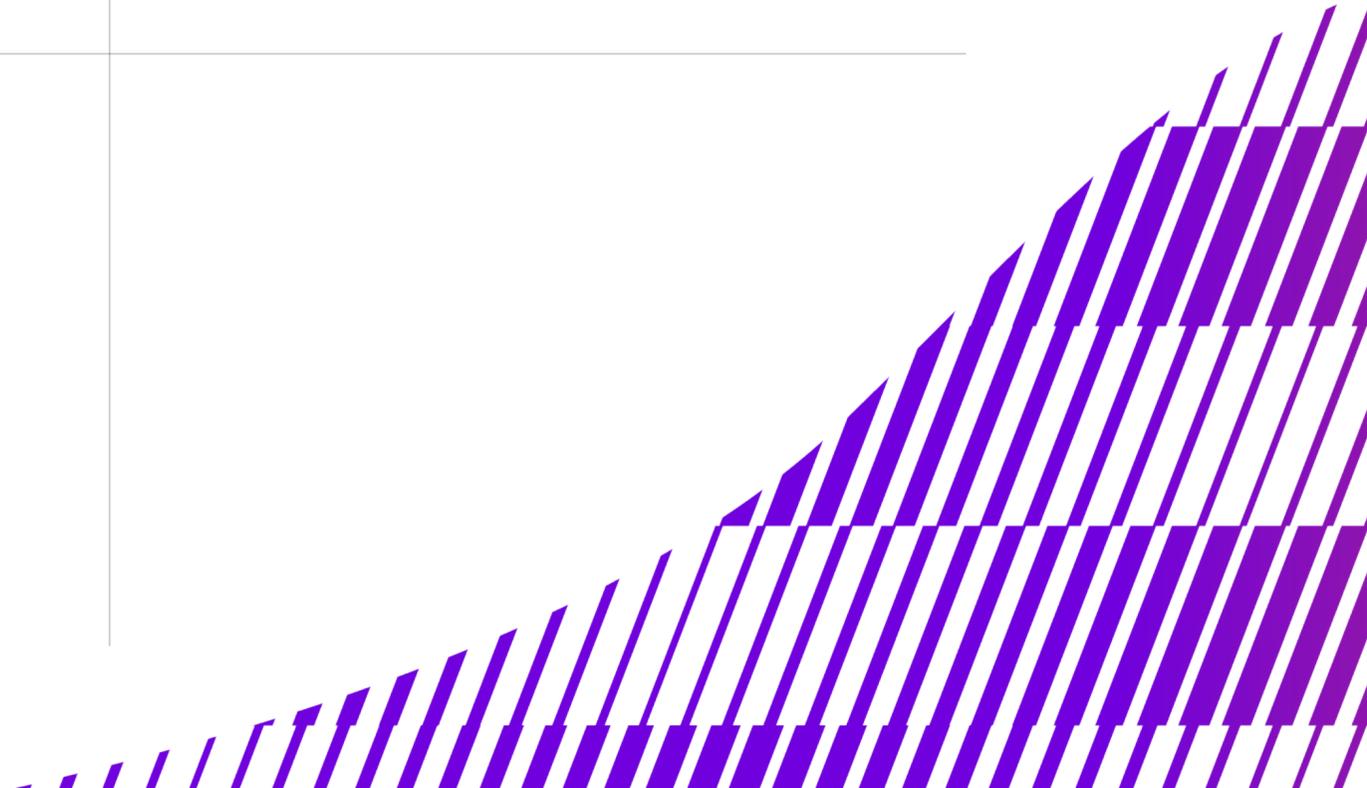
Adaptability was linked to higher levels of resilience, improved relationships, better mental wellbeing, and was positively related to other performance outcomes.

Development programmes that encourage collaboration and peer-to-peer learning can help us deal with future challenges

By knowing our natural preferences, learning from others, and creating space to collaborate, we can overcome the challenges brought about by uncertainty, hybrid working, and leading others.

Team adaptability plays a big role in shaping our own individual experiences

People experienced less stress and higher levels of performance when their team had a clear focus, high levels of communication, and a positive collective mindset.



6.1

NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

This data was collected between November 2021 and February 2022, in which time 198 people were surveyed on a number of different things...

Individual adaptability

We used a 9-item scale produced by a research group in Australia to measure each person's cognitive, behavioural, and emotional adaptability ^[8]. The overall score on this scale gives an individual's level of adaptability.

To work out the difference between those who scored High on adaptability and Low on adaptability, we took the bottom 10% (low adaptability) and top 10% (high adaptability) of people on this scale and compared their scores to the average adaptability of the group as a whole.

Team adaptability

We used an adapted version of the scale devised by Marques-Quinteiro et al ^[13]. These items were changed to be more relevant to the processes of team adaptability, and we added an item on effective communication. These questions were answered using a 7-point likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). We then calculated the Team Adaptability score by taking the average score across these items. Like with individual adaptability, the bottom 10% of scorers on this measure made up the "low" team adaptability group. The top 10% of scorers on this measure made up the

"high" team adaptability group. We also used the score on each individual item to score each individual's team on key team behaviours.

Biggest changes

We asked each individual to list the top 3 changes they experienced. We then used inductive content analysis to understand the top responses across our sample ^[14].

Impact of the pandemic

To understand how people perceived themselves to be impacted by the pandemic, we got them to self-rate how the pandemic

impacted them on a scale from “very negatively” (0) to “very positively” (100). A sliding scale was used to obtain these ratings, with the slider starting at “neutral” (50). Any scores above 50 represented a positive impact, and any scores below 50 represented a negative impact.

Sliding scales were also used to obtain scores for overall coping and confidence for the future.

Future challenges

We asked people what they believed their biggest challenge to be over the next 12 months. They gave their responses in text form. We used reflexive thematic analysis to organise these responses around key themes ^[15].

Developing adaptability

Finally, we looked at how people would go about developing their individual adaptability by getting them to select the methods they perceived to be useful from a pre-defined list of 18 options. This list was put together based on the techniques used in applied practice.

Demographics

The demographics of our sample included the following characteristics.

Age

16-24	19
25-34	64
35-44	51
45-54	44
55-64	20
65+	0

Location

Europe	188
Asia Pacific	6
Americas	3
Middle East & Africa	1

Company role

Graduate-level	18
Contractor	4
Administrative or clerical	9
Trained professional	69
Supervisor or team leader	31

Department head	26
Director	26
CEO or COO	11
Advisory	3
Board level	1

Organisation size

1-10	35
11-50	27
51-250	36
251-500	14
501-1000	17
1001-5000	38
5001 +	31

Employment

Employed full-time	161
Employed part-time	7
Self-employed	20
Seeking opportunities	1
Retired	1
Freelance	4
Student	4
Other	0

Industry

Arts / Media & Advertising	4
Education & research	32
Environment & resources	2
Financial services	13
Government	21
Healthcare	18
Legal	2
Training & consultancy	28
Manufacturing & logistics	5
Non-profit	4
Retail / leisure / hospitality & sport	38
Law enforcement / military	5
Technology & communications	9
Other	17

Years experience

Under 3	23
3-5	25
6-10	28
11-20	45
21+	77

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