

Driving the change: Menopause and the workplace

A report by Circle In

Supported by the Victorian Women's Trust

Executive summary

Circle In is on a mission: to create a better working world. Our work to date has centered on helping organizations support employees that are parents and caregivers. This year, we turned our focus to another cohort of the workforce: people experiencing menopause. The results of our research were so arresting that this report was born, along with its guidelines for employers. We hope it serves as a call to arms for organizations globally, looking to improve the experience for all their employees - including those that may currently be making their menopausal journey in silence.

This research was conducted by Circle In, with the support of the Victorian Women's Trust, in 2021. It set out to understand levels of awareness around menopause in the workplace, find out what resources are currently available to people both experiencing menopause and those in supporting roles, and gauge the business impact of the status quo.

Our research supports key findings in similar studies globally: that there is a culture of ignorance and isolation around menopause in the workplace, and a glaring lack of support for employees and their managers. Our anecdotal findings relate the enormous human impact of the situation. Then there is the business impact, when organizational and managerial support is at best inconsistent, and staff who experience menopause feel their work is negatively affected.

Key findings

The impact on working life is huge:

- 83% of respondents said their work was negatively affected. Only 17% said it was business as usual.
- Over half (58%) of respondents that have experienced menopause said that managing work during their menopausal transition was 'challenging'.
- Almost half (48%) of all respondents struggled with their drop in confidence at work, and almost as many (46%) felt stressed by having to hide their experience.
- 30% said they felt disconnected or distracted from their workplace.
- Almost half (45%) of respondents said they considered retiring or taking a break from work when their menopausal symptoms were severe - but 72% of those did not go through with it, many citing financial reasons.

Knowledge and resources are scarce:

- Half of those that know someone going through menopause said their knowledge is low or non-existent.
- 76% that have experienced menopause would have liked information, advice or access to a support network at work to aid them through this challenging period.

Support depends (mostly) on who your manager is:

- Only 3% of respondents felt that they had received 'excellent' support from their workplace during menopause. 60% said support was 'poor' or 'below average'.
- 70% who have experienced menopause did not feel comfortable talking to their manager about their needs. However, 53% said that their manager's awareness would have been a great support to them during this time.

Recommendations

Circle In has made a number of recommendations for employers, which include: developing a framework for flexibility; raising awareness in the workplace and among people leaders; building a community; and making adjustments to the physical working environment. Please refer to page 12 of this report for more.

Introduction

At Circle In, we help organizations care for their people who care. From parental leave to managing the work-life juggle, to caring for a loved one with a disability, we enable businesses to consistently support their working parents and caregivers through life's challenges and milestones.

Yet, there was one topic that our customers talked to us about time and again: menopause. What resources were out there to support staff going through the menopausal transition? What were other organizations doing in this area? How could businesses improve their existing policies and managerial approach?

Truth is, we expected to find very little. Menopause is not a subject that's widely discussed in workplaces. Few employers around the world offer menopausal policies or leave¹. And the data - well, the information that was available certainly hinted that here was an employee experience worth investigating.

So, across January and February 2021, Circle In, with the support of the Victorian Women's Trust, heard from more than 700 people about their experience of menopause in the workplace.

The results were shocking.

83% of respondents told us their work was negatively affected. Almost half said they considered retiring or taking a break from work when their menopausal symptoms were severe. And 60% told us workplace support was 'poor' or 'below average'.

Only 3% of respondents felt that they had received 'excellent' support from their workplace during menopause.

What was striking wasn't just the glaring statistics telling us about a cohort of the working population whose needs were not being met, it was the personal tales that weaved through these results. The stories of isolation, lack of empathy, and absence of managerial support or understanding were gut-wrenching. In these pages, we've shared some of these extracts with you, to highlight the very human side to this experience.

Then there is the astounding business impact. We found that while most people experience some challenges during their menopausal transition, there is little or no workplace support to help them manage those challenges. Almost a third of respondents told us they felt disconnected from their workplace. Whether a manager seemed equipped or willing to assist largely depended on their gender, or their existing relationship with the employee. We also found that most people who haven't experienced menopause don't know much about it or how to support someone going through it.

Only 4% of people that know someone going through menopause would rate their knowledge level as 'high'. Nearly all said their knowledge level was either 'medium' (46%) or 'low' (47%).

Isn't it time employers tried to deliver a consistent, positive experience for these employees? Isn't it worth showing them the support they deserve at every life stage?

We say yes! However, our research is just the beginning; it lays bare the reasons why businesses should seek to better support their employees that are experiencing menopause. But we know from experience that true change only happens when policy becomes practice. To facilitate this, we have also provided – with the aid of the Victorian Women's Trust and their partnership with the Chalice Foundation – suggested steps for employers that will inspire action NOW and help break down the taboo of menopause in the workplace. We hope that you will use this guide to create a more open, supportive workplace culture, and play your part in driving the change.

The menopause experience

Today, the average age of retirement for women in the US is 63 years², In Australia, where the average retirement age is 52.1 years³, the number of people still working between 60 and 64 years of age has increased by 22%⁴ since 2000.

Women experience the onset of menopause, on average, at around 50 years of age⁵. The experience can last for two years, or up to ten – and sometimes longer. Up to 8% of women experience early or premature menopause, having their last period by the time they are 45⁶.

This means that a substantial number of people experience menopause while still in the workforce. Often, these are individuals in senior and/or public-facing jobs, whose roles depend on their ability to command respect. With decades of work experience under their belt, they are often highly valued and significant contributors to the workforce.

“ I felt embarrassed when sweat would pour down my face while I was teaching. Students would notice, but not say anything.

At times I experienced a sense of panic... which was difficult to mask in meetings and other professional settings, and during which it was extremely difficult to stay mentally present.

I was unable to hold a conversation due to brain fog. The words just wouldn't come.

I had to leave work early at times due to rushes of menstrual blood during meetings, etc.”

From the outside, there's often no way to tell which of the women in your workplace are going through menopause. It may be completely invisible. But for the women themselves, managing the experience adds another layer of complexity to their work life and responsibilities day-to-day, especially when they fear others knowing, or feel as if they can't talk openly about menopause.



58%

of the people we asked said that managing work during their menopausal transition was 'challenging'.

43%

said they'd lose focus in long meetings, and 41% felt the need for fresh air more often.

“ I was unbelievably emotional and found it hard to concentrate. I would often burst into tears over nothing and struggled to cope with things I would usually handle with ease. I actually thought I was losing my mind.”

“I never told [my employer] – I was a full-time executive and I kept up the pace. However, I got a lot of support from other women in the workplace.

I have a male manager and they are awkward conversations. It's also not something that tends to get discussed openly more generally. A little like mental health a few years ago.

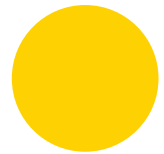
It seems the first response is, “Oh, it's hormonal and you're emotional. You'll need to learn to curb that”.



We talk at length about 'managing the juggle' as a working parent, but managing the competing demands of work and life is a challenge during the menopausal transition, too.

Our research found that their emotional response caused the greatest distress for respondents, often compounded by a sense of going through it alone, because, as one respondent put it, “Women's problems' aren't really spoken about”. Nearly three-quarters of the people that answered this question told us that their stress and anxiety levels went up.

Then there are the physical effects, including sudden changes in body temperature, needing to use the bathroom more frequently, and the consequences of difficulty sleeping. Despite this, 28% of people that know someone going through menopause were not aware that some aspects of office working can make it physically difficult for people experiencing menopause to work there.



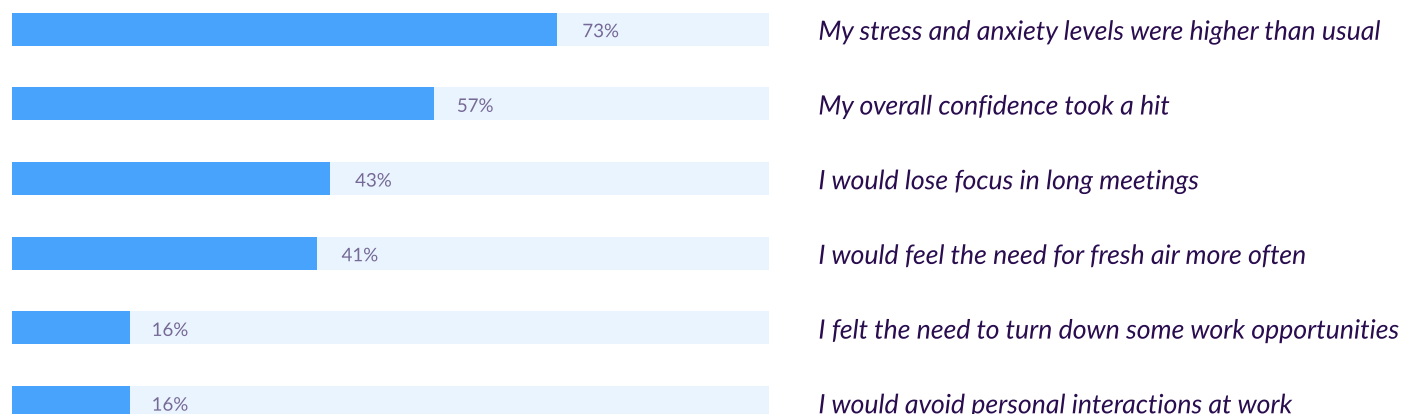
The impact on working life

Imagine giving a presentation you've been preparing for weeks. You know your topic inside out, you're commanding the attention of the room... and then a hot flash⁷ hits. Suddenly you're crimson in the face and dripping sweat, with all eyes on you.

For women experiencing menopause, this is a very real scenario that has a deep impact on their confidence.

When asked to define what was most challenging about their experience, almost half (48%) of respondents said it was their drop in confidence, and almost as many (46%) said it was the stress of having to hide their experience. The stress of juggling work with the effect of bodily changes appears to be the most challenging aspect of work during menopause, cited by 62% of respondents.

How did your experience with menopause negatively affect your work?



Many women experience heavy bleeding and pain. They might need to make sure they're near a bathroom at all times. That presents problems if they're giving a long presentation, their job involves offsite travel, or they're in a profession like teaching where they can't just step out of class as they need.

Women going through menopause may also have difficulty sleeping, leading to daytime fatigue and difficulty concentrating.

“At varying times during my cycle, the impact of pain and other symptoms meant I needed time off from work, and didn't reveal the reason for my 'illness'. I had not experienced pain or the other quite debilitating symptoms prior to perimenopause.”

“ For the first time ever, I was consistently feeling overwhelmed. And hot – damn hot.

My employer couldn't care less. In fact, I felt I had to keep it secret as menopausal women are regarded as slightly dumb and can't be trusted to work effectively.”

Like the physical effects of menopause, cognitive side effects are temporary and most women feel 'themselves' again once the menopausal transition is complete. While it's happening, though, it can feel endless.

In fact, research has shown⁸ that while work outcomes aren't affected by menopausal status, there is a direct link between hot flashes and intention to stop working.

Little surprise, then, that almost half of our respondents said that they considered retiring or taking time off work when their menopausal symptoms were severe. 28% of those went through with it. Of those who didn't go through with it, almost half (42%) cited financial reasons.

That's one in eight women experiencing menopause who stepped out of the workforce due to their symptoms, and another two in eight who would do so if they could afford to.

With better support and understanding, could those people be retained?

“ I couldn't afford to take time off work, so I just endured.

I am in the early stages of a new career path, and the work is very fulfilling for me. At times, however, I wasn't sure if I could continue due to the pain and other symptoms, and really thought it would be hard to go on.”

30%

said they felt disconnected or distracted from their workplace during menopause.

45%

said they considered retiring or taking a break from work when their menopausal symptoms were severe.

The importance of managerial support

There's no doubt that those going through menopause are eager to get support from their managers. Well over half of all the people we surveyed thought manager support was 'important' or 'very important', and 53% of those who have experience of menopause said that their manager's awareness would have been a great support to them during this transition. This was followed closely (49%) by openness to comfortably talk about menopause in the workplace.

Over half of all survey respondents thought manager support was 'important' or 'very important'.

On saying that, however, the majority of those respondents that have experienced menopause did not feel comfortable talking to their manager or employer about their challenges.

When we dug a little deeper, we often found this was down to gender – with 22% explicitly saying they would not feel comfortable sharing their challenges with their manager because he is male, or because the workplace was male-dominated. Reading the responses, there is an overwhelming perception that male bosses or employers would not be approachable, understanding, or would penalize the employee for appearing 'weak'.

Conversely, many respondents talked about the ease with which they could talk to colleagues or managers who had personal experience of menopause. There were also considerable mentions of age being a barrier to having open discussions.



Seven out of ten women who have experienced menopause are not comfortable talking to their manager about their challenges or needs.

73%

stated stress and anxiety was higher than usual, reinforcing that women need support from their workplace.

“I don't want my male boss to withhold opportunities because he thinks I can't handle it. I already have to fight for equality.”

A logical starting point for people leaders, then, is to raise awareness of menopause in general. This helps to foster a workplace culture where the topic is taken seriously. When everyone (including managers with little understanding of menopause) become familiar with the issues involved, those experiencing menopause feel more comfortable asking for the support they need.

And what about the support that's currently available to employees going through similar challenges? We asked women who rated their workplace support as 'good' or 'above average' what their companies offered. Some responses focused on the practical, with one respondent appreciating the fact that her company "allowed me to buy fans for all of my work stations". Others received support from female colleagues who had gone through it, or were given the flexibility to manage the experience for themselves.

How did your workplace support you?

“ Personal leave and no questions asked what the leave is for.

Supportive conversations, information sharing on strategies, kind responses when sleep deprived.

My boss has gone through it, so it's easy to talk about symptoms and ways of managing.

I am the manager of a small staff of menopausal women, so we support each other.

Being understanding and supportive. Not minding me talking about it – I want to normalize discussion and information sharing around all women's issues.”

Why do you not feel comfortable sharing your challenges or needs with your manager?

“They are much younger and don't understand or want to know. Menopause is seen as a failing and an excuse for age discrimination.

Concern about my manager thinking negatively about my performance.

I don't want to lose my job.

I don't feel comfortable in a small, young male-dominated business.

Concerned about perceptions of underperformance and age.

At the time I didn't fully understand what was happening myself and so felt poorly equipped to have a conversation. It was also quite embarrassing.

Felt like I was just being too needy. Difficult enough given we were also in a pandemic.

Very male-dominated industry. I thought I'd lose out on opportunities.

I'm in almost an all-male environment. It's hard enough being the most senior woman in the firm.

Mental health is legitimized, but menopause is just embarrassing.”

Guidelines for employers

While menopause is a near-universal experience for women (and transgender and non-binary people, too), it can often feel very isolating. Many are reluctant to let anyone know that they're experiencing it, especially in the workplace, and therefore fail to access the best available support.

Instead, they find their own solutions where they can, even if that falls short of what's needed. Self-employed respondents were able to shift their working hours, rest when needed or simply step outside for some fresh air. Other women had less flexibility.

Sought-after support can come in the form of empathy and openness, or it can be physical assistance such as cool drinking water, fans, and provision of a rest area. Three-quarters of respondents told us they would have liked information or advice from their employer about available support, or access to a network at work (such as an advice line or women's group) to aid them through this challenging period.



“Our workplace is very focused on general wellbeing so there is leave available if you are unwell and there are things to support wellbeing which would help – but nothing specific to menopause.”

“This week the company introduced menstrual and menopausal leave – six days per year.”

What next?

If your workplace isn't set up to support women during the menopausal transition, you risk losing experienced and highly competent employees.

Not just this survey by Circle In, but others that have examined the topic of menopause in the workplace⁹, draw the same conclusion: a culture of empathy and understanding could make the world of difference to people experiencing menopause in the workplace.

If your organization genuinely wants to drive change, the results speak for themselves. This is your chance to act. In the following pages, we share some key areas in which employers can improve outcomes for those going through menopause.

01 Develop a framework for flexibility

Every person experiences menopause differently. Some may not need to make any changes to their duties. Others may benefit from flexible or changed hours, or a temporary shift in their role (for example, reducing client-facing work while they experience frequent hot flashes).

Your employee has the best insight into their own experience and also knows their own role the best. Your role is to provide a framework of flexibility within which they can make the adjustments they need.

Consider what your framework looks like, for example how it fits into your diversity and inclusion strategy, or how formal you wish to make it.

One of the avenues to consider is introducing policies for absence and flexible working options. It is important that these take into account menopause as a potentially long-term and fluctuating experience.

86%

of respondents wished they had better access to flexible working options as a way of supporting them through menopause.



The Victorian Women's Trust has developed a [menstrual and menopause workplace policy template](#) for use by employers. The template is freely available and ready to be integrated into your workplace. It is designed to be flexible for adaptation to your particular workplace and the needs of your employee. It offers, where practicable:

1. The option to work from home;
2. The option to provide a rest area or other alternatives so the employee can stay at the workplace; and
3. Up to 12 paid leave days per year where the experience of menstruation and/or menopause mean the employee can't perform work duties.

02 Raise awareness in your workplace

Menopause is rarely talked about, either in the workforce or in the media. As a result, women going through menopause need support, and this is an opportunity for workplaces to raise awareness.

There are various ways you can do this, including:

1. Hold an event and invite women to connect and help normalize the conversation. This is also an opportunity to educate employees and leaders on the experience of menopause and the support required.
2. Share real stories. Our work at Circle In has shown that role modeling and sharing experiences are an incredibly powerful way to drive cultural change. So why not ask a few women to share their stories with the wider team?
3. Find a senior leader to be a support champion. Change requires influence, so identify someone who will be in a position to drive awareness, policy and support services with key stakeholders.

“No one talks about menopause. I do. I want other women to know what is going to occur. But talking menopause to a man 15 years younger than you is not easy.”

03 Equip and inform your managers and leaders

The role of a manager is to normalize the subject of menopause and encourage transparency in staff. However as the research has shown, there is a lack of both awareness and information on the topic. With only 3% of respondents feeling that they had received 'excellent' support from their workplace during menopause, equipping, upskilling and supporting managers is absolutely essential.

There are a few ways you can do this:

1. Develop a short manager conversation guide that outlines things such as: understanding menopause, the impact on working life, how to provide the right support, guided questions and key considerations.
2. Implement manager training. This could be as simple as raising awareness, right through to formal training.
3. Invite managers to join employee groups. If you have an Employee Resource Group (ERG) or online community to support women experiencing menopause, invite a selection of managers or leaders to join. This will provide a forum to increase awareness of the impacts of menopause, and help managers understand how they can provide the right support.

At Circle In, we understand that managers have a key role to play, which is why our platform now includes both a manager conversation guide and training.

04 Build a community

We know that most people experiencing menopause would like to receive information or advice from their employer about available support, or access to a support network at work.

If any employee support services exist, consider directing your employee to these. Better still, set up an ERG or online community for employees to connect with each other. This could be using Slack, Yammer, Teams or whatever tools or platforms your organization prefers for networking.

It should be noted that not everyone who has experienced menopause will necessarily be supportive, well-informed, or positive. The success of connecting employees around their menopause experience will partly depend on the overall workplace culture, and will depend on the care taken in setting up the platforms and opportunities for connection.

1. Start a social channel. Pick a platform that is easy to use, readily available and start sharing. Create a space that is welcoming, safe and encourages authentic conversations about menopause in the workplace. (We love #hotwomen – see the case study on the next page.)

2. Form a menopause Employee Resource Group. Starting an ERG is an important step towards building an inclusive workplace that ensures employees experiencing menopause feel safe, supported and are encouraged to bring their best selves to work. When employees choose to engage in causes they care about and are empowered to own the decision-making process, they become great advocates for the company as well as the groups or initiatives they are supporting.

8 out of 10 people that know someone experiencing menopause say they don't know how to support them during this time.

Case Study: Creating a channel for discussion

"I think one of the things that's really stopped real inclusion when it comes to menopause, is a lack of information and a lack of data. Some of the information we know anecdotally because people have shared their experiences with us, but there's no real understanding about how menopause affects people in the workplace, how it affects their careers and the impact that that has.

At Herbert Smith Freehills, we've connected with our people on menopause in a couple of ways, and they're really employee-led initiatives. The first one is a great group on our internal social networking site called Hot Women, which I just love. That's been an awesome space that a group of people experiencing menopause just started, and they share tips and experiences and different things. It really shows the power of community and the power of being able to connect with other people going through the same experiences as you.

We've also done a couple of events, trying to raise awareness around menopause and the impact that it has on people. We all know that this is a real taboo to talk about at work - and yet it affects a huge proportion of our population. As employers, we're starting to try to lift that taboo. It impacts on people's careers, people's wellbeing, and it should be treated just like any other career or wellbeing issue."

Madeleine Motion,
Diversity & Inclusion Manager, Asia Pacific
Herbert Smith Freehills

43%

of women with experience of menopause would have liked better ventilation, air conditioning, and temperature control.

28%

of respondents who hadn't gone through menopause were not aware that some aspects of office working can make it physically difficult for women experiencing menopause to work there.



05 Make adjustments to the physical working environment

The nature of office work can make it particularly difficult for women experiencing menopause to physically work there. Which means practical and easy changes to the office environment can often improve working conditions dramatically.

Some of the ways employers can improve the physical environment include:



- Better ventilation, air conditioning and temperature control.
- Access to additional cooling such as desk fans.
- Natural light.
- Access to cool drinking water.
- Provision of a quiet or restful area.
- If a specific uniform is required, clothing made from breathable materials.

Time to act

At Circle In, we help organizations show they care. In conducting this research, we have uncovered a huge cohort of the working population that deserves more of that care.

From the fundamentals of making a working day physically bearable, to enabling a culture that accommodates honest conversations, there is still work to be done.

There are many parallels to be drawn between the impact of pregnancy and menopause, yet there is a chasm in how the two are accommodated by employers. When it comes to supporting female colleagues or employees, it's vital to think beyond pregnancy to the whole of reproductive health.

What can you do today to provide meaningful support? How can your organization become a better place to work during menopause? We hope this resource offers some inspiration, and is your starting point to drive that change.

For more resources on how you can support your employees, visit www.circlein.com, drop us an email at hello@circlein.com, or get in touch with us [here](#).

With thanks to...



Established in 1985, the Victorian Women's Trust (VWT) is a proudly independent feminist organization that supports women, girls and gender diverse people to thrive.

VWT creates social change campaigns, conducts research, runs thought-provoking events, provides mentorship opportunities, and gives grants to vital grassroots projects. Its advocacy work focuses on three areas: economic security, health and safety, and equal representation. Creating change in these areas is key to achieving true gender equality.

vwt.org.au



Harnessing decades of service to menstrual education, the Chalice Foundation was created to gather and channel the expertise of educators and to promote menstrual wellbeing, quality menstrual education and, above all, a positive menstrual culture. The Chalice Foundation partners with The Victorian Women's Trust through the Dugdale Trust for Women & Girls to realize these goals on a national level.

chalicefoundation.org

Survey data

This survey was conducted by Circle In in January-February 2021. The survey had 714 results across three cohorts: "I am going through menopause right now, or I have gone through it", "I know someone going through menopause", and "I have not experienced menopause, nor do I know anyone going through menopause". 70% of respondents work in Australia, 12% in the US, 7% in the UK and the rest are global, including Ireland, Singapore and Canada. Survey questions were tailored according to the respondent's cohort*.

*'Respondents' denotes responses to the referenced question.

1. Source: [Menstrual and menopausal leave: from flexible work to best practice in gender equality and wellbeing in the workplace](#), Hall and Willcox, 2021

2. Source: [Center for Retirement Research](#), Boston College, 2018

3. Source: [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#), 2020

4. Source: [Australian Treasury](#), 2020

5. While menopause is a near-universal phenomenon for women, some may not ever experience menstruation or menopause due to various reasons. Menopause can also affect transgender and non-binary people, too.

6. Source: [Premature and early menopause](#), Jean Hailes

7. 'Hot flash' is the term used in the United States. It is also referred to as a 'hot flush' in other English-speaking countries.

8. Source: [Work outcomes in midlife women](#), Women's Midlife Health, 2018

9. For example, Victorian Women's Trust's survey of 3,460 women in [About Bloody Time](#), by Karen Pickering and Jane Bennett.

About Circle In

Circle In is a unique family benefits platform designed to build trust, support and connection with employees, and guide them on their journeys through life as parents and caregivers. Circle In works with leading employers across the globe and has partnered with brands such as Atlassian, GAP Parents, Coca-Cola Amatil, Estee Lauder Companies and Culture Amp, to name a few.

The platform features a custom branded experience, automated manager nudges, manager conversation guides, journey workflows and reporting capability. The offering supports all families on their journey from considering, to pregnancy, to parenthood and back to work again, enabling working parents to navigate the complexities of parenthood, from planning all the way through to teenage years and caring for the elderly.

By preventing employee disengagement and turnover, Circle In provides proven ROI – but more than anything else, it's the right thing to do.

A recent study across all users showed:

85% of employees using Circle In say the support for working parents makes them feel more positive towards their organization.

79% are more inclined to recommend their organization to others as a result of the support for working parents.

88% of employees have had a good to excellent experience using their organization's Circle In platform.

We know that organizations are nothing without their people. And people care. So Circle In helps you care for people who care.

We would love to show you what we do. Visit our website, book a demo, or message us at hello@circlein.com if you want to know more.

Talk to us

