



WHITEPAPER

Furloughed Workers: Threats, Anxiety, and Staying Away From Work

A Study of 1,000 Furloughed Employees in the UK&I

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report discusses the findings of a survey of 1,000 UK&I-based furloughed professionals with respect to their attitudes towards email and phishing. The topics covered include existing business continuity procedures while they're furloughed, attitudes to email security, and the emotional impact of Britain's millions of recently-abandoned inboxes.

The report shows the majority of furloughed workers are concerned about their unattended inboxes, with nearly half of those questioned expecting to spend more than one day replying to missed correspondence.

From a security perspective, that anxiety presents an element of risk, with nearly half of those questioned believing it the responsibility of IT workers to address phishing emails. Our survey shows that the majority of workers have received insufficient IT security training, which would allow them to identify and respond to threats.

We recommend that businesses take preparations for returning workers that would include technological solutions, paired with relevant training.

Introduction

The tech sector has historically proven resilient to economic turmoil. During the 2008 financial crisis, technology firms continued to recruit, while other sectors of the economy (like retail, manufacturing, and finance) shed jobs in almost unprecedented numbers. This time, however, is different. The economic fallout caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is perversely egalitarian, with almost all industries suffering.

Now, techies are standing shoulder-to-shoulder with those in other industries: like media, travel, and finance. And collectively, they're all answering the same question: What now?

For many, furlough represents unfamiliar territory, existing in a bizarre hinterland between employment and unemployment. And in many cases, the pressures of work remain while people are officially off-duty.

Key Findings

- Furlough is a relatively new concept, as far as the UK labour market goes, and there are inevitable ambiguities about what it means. Many furloughed workers are unclear about what their responsibilities are while they're away from the workplace.
- More than half of those surveyed expect it'll take more than one day to clear their email backlog, with finance workers facing the biggest burden.
- Security isn't the biggest priority for furloughed professionals, with most workers unenthusiastic about infosec refresher training.
- Two-thirds of respondents reported feeling some level of anxiety about their email backlog, with nearly 70 percent reportedly checking their emails during furlough.

Methodology and Scope

This report is derived from a survey of 1,000 furloughed employees across the UK. Workers from the following regions are represented: Greater London, East Midlands, West Midlands, North East, North West, Northern Ireland, Scotland, South East, South West, Wales, Yorkshire and the Humber.

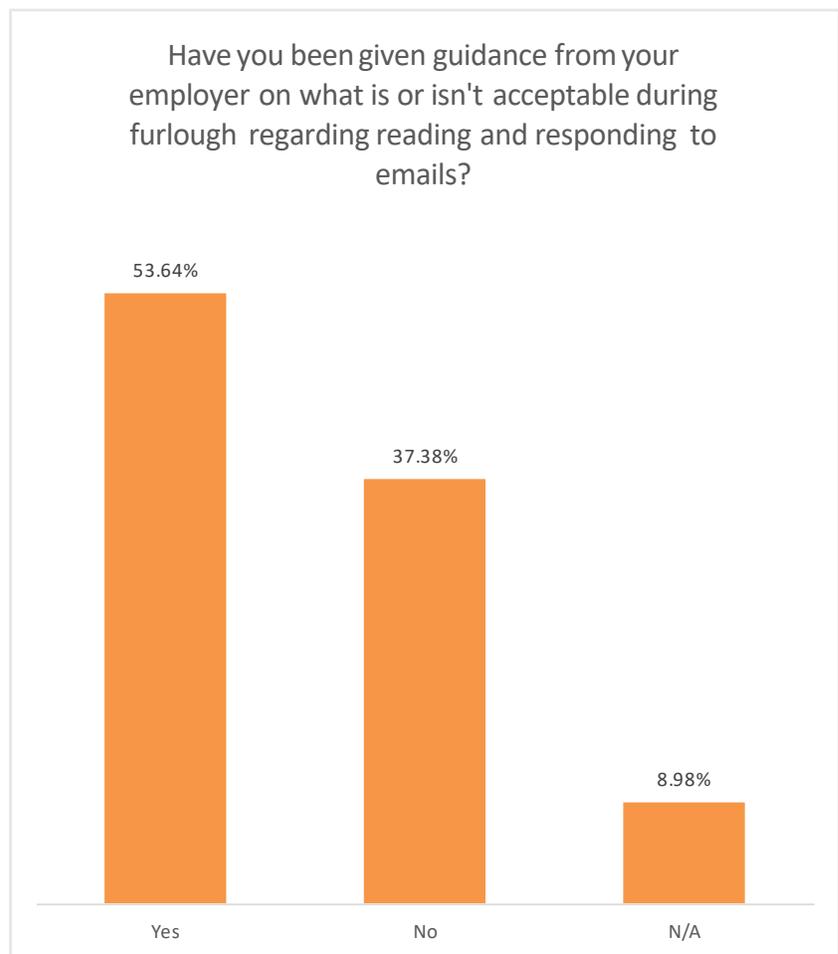
Those surveyed identified as working in one of the following industries: architecture, engineering, and building; arts and culture; education; finance; healthcare; human resources; IT and telecoms; legal; manufacturing and utilities; retail, catering, and leisure; sales, media and marketing; travel and transport; or other.

PART 1 – AN EMAIL TSUNAMI

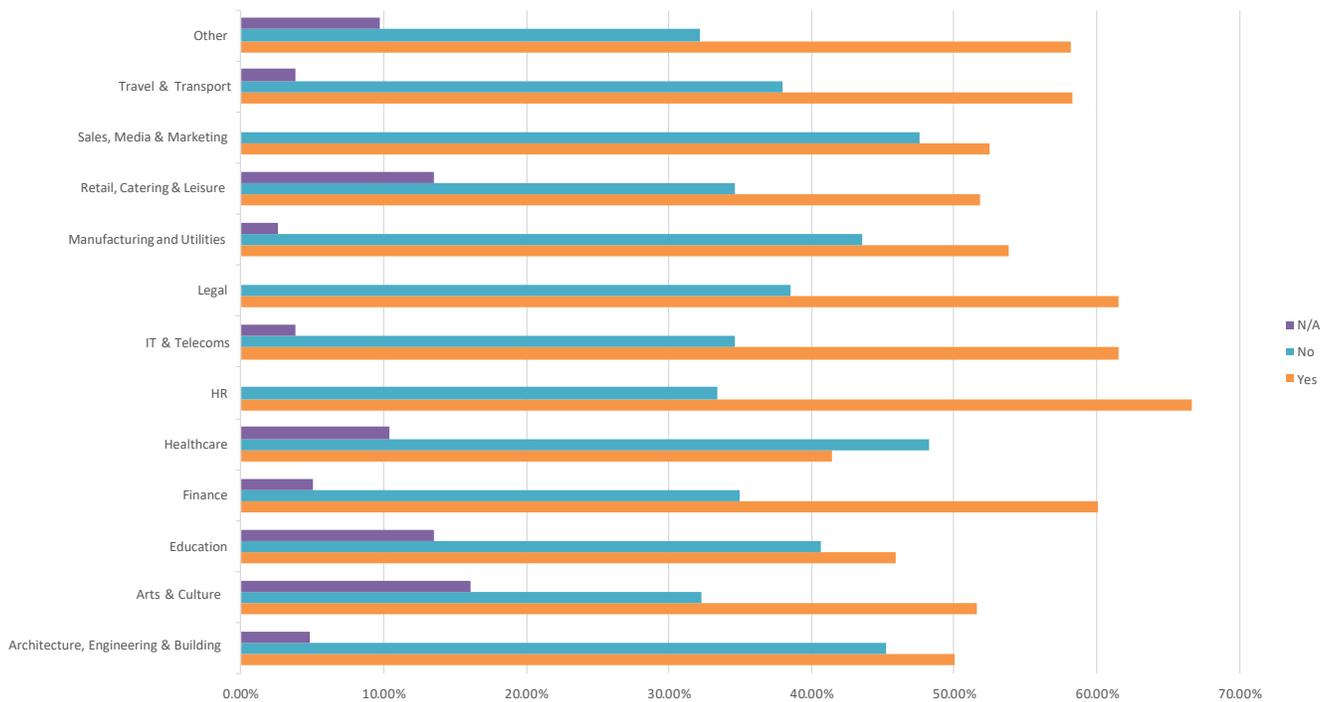
In life, only three things are certain: Death, taxes, and email. Even at the best of times, keeping up with important work correspondence is an ongoing struggle. And it's therefore no surprise that this aspect of the working routine is of concern to furloughed workers. Will they return to an unmanageable mountain of unread email, or will they continue to check email while under furlough?

Of course, it's not quite as simple as that. The UK's furlough programme — known officially as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme — has explicit rules prohibiting most forms of work-related activity while receiving payments. That includes replying to work-related emails. Failure to comply could result in a firm being forced to repay received funds or be subject to severe fines.

Despite that, over half of respondents said they had received guidance, which means that the other half either didn't receive guidance or wasn't aware of having received any.



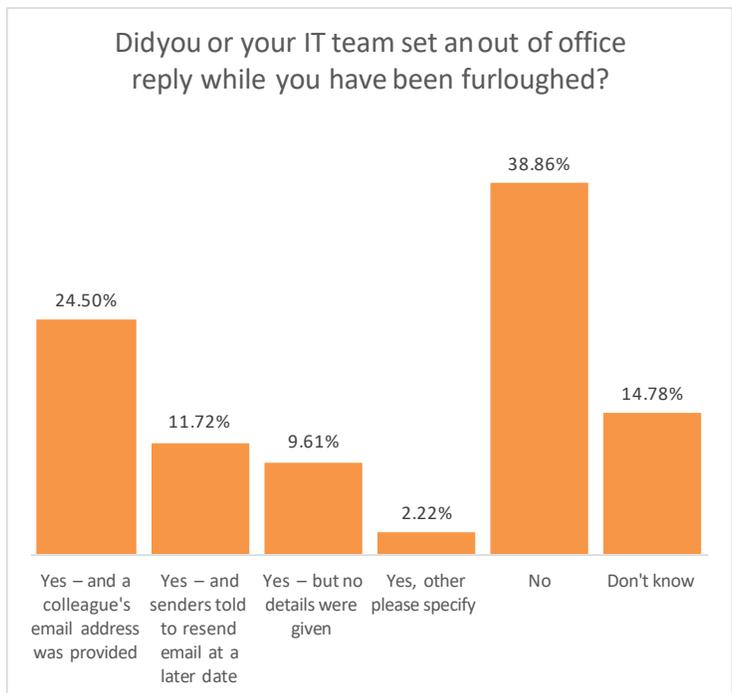
When you take a closer look at the numbers, it becomes more apparent that the level of guidance differs wildly between sectors. Over 60 percent of workers in the fields of finance, HR, and IT and telecoms reported having received clear guidance from their employers. However, only 40 percent of those working in healthcare reported having received clear instruction from their employers.



There were some consistencies across sectors, however. Only a minority of workers knew definitively that an out of office auto response was in place during their absence. This presents a problem for employees, many of whom could face a larger-than-expected email backlog when they return to work as a result of follow-up emails.

When broken down further, a quarter of respondents said their out of office reply instructed third parties to contact a colleague still actively working. Around ten percent said their auto responder asked the sender to resend the email at a later date. Nine percent gave no other details.

For those on furlough, there's no guarantee they'll have a job to return to. Nor is it immediately obvious how long they'll be on leave. The initial scheme was planned to last just three months. However, as the situation has developed, the UK government has announced it'll continue subsidising furloughed workers until October 2020.

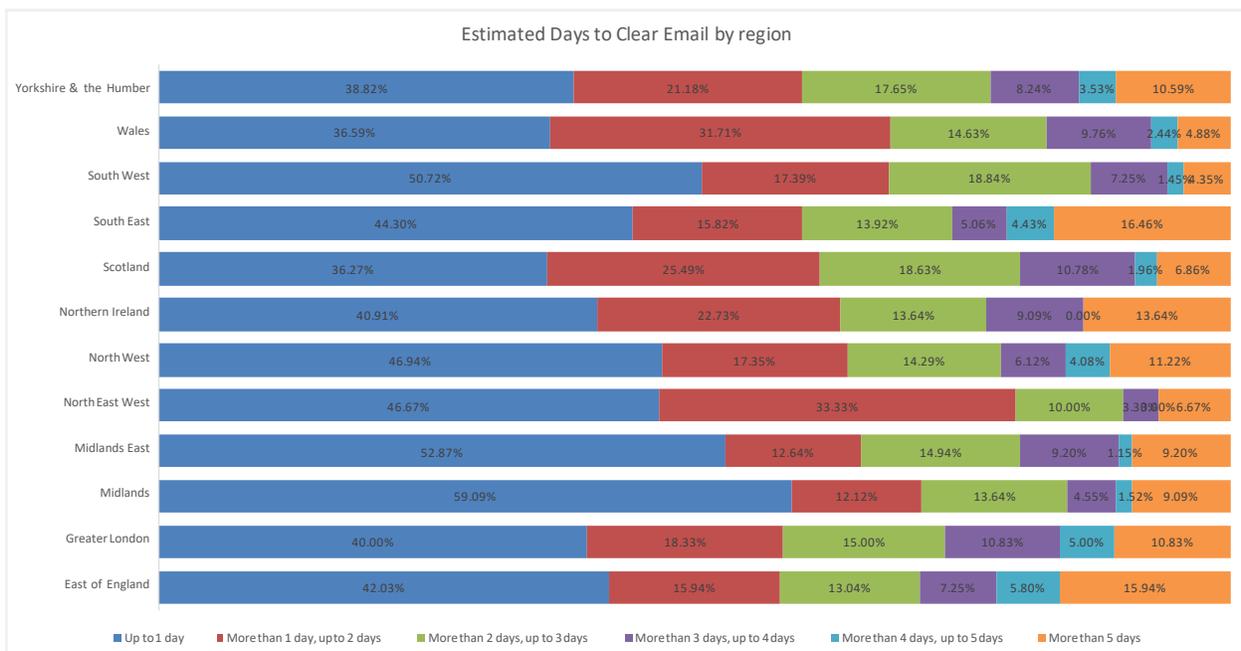


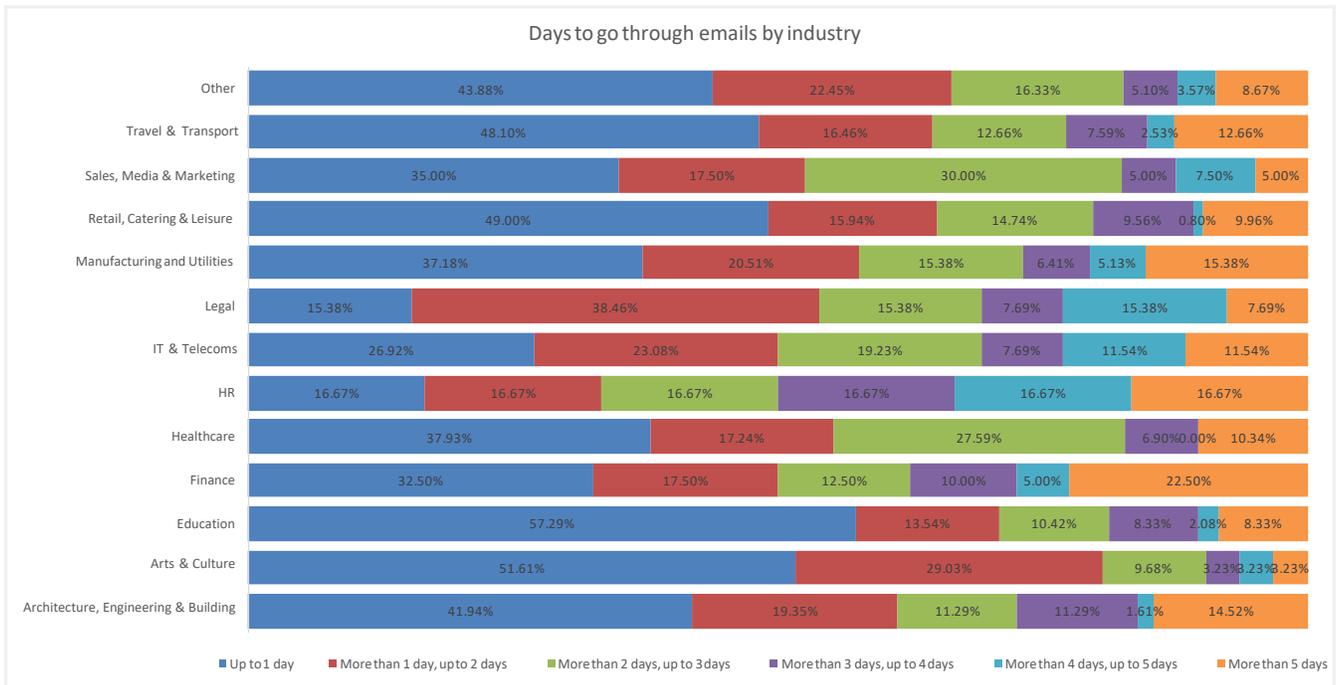
Recipients were asked how long they expected it would take to clear their email backlog when they returned to work. The majority — 44 percent — said they believed they could accomplish it within a day. The next biggest group, representing around 19 percent of the sample, said it would take two days. Meanwhile, nearly 11 percent estimated it would take more than five days to fully chip away at their email backlog.



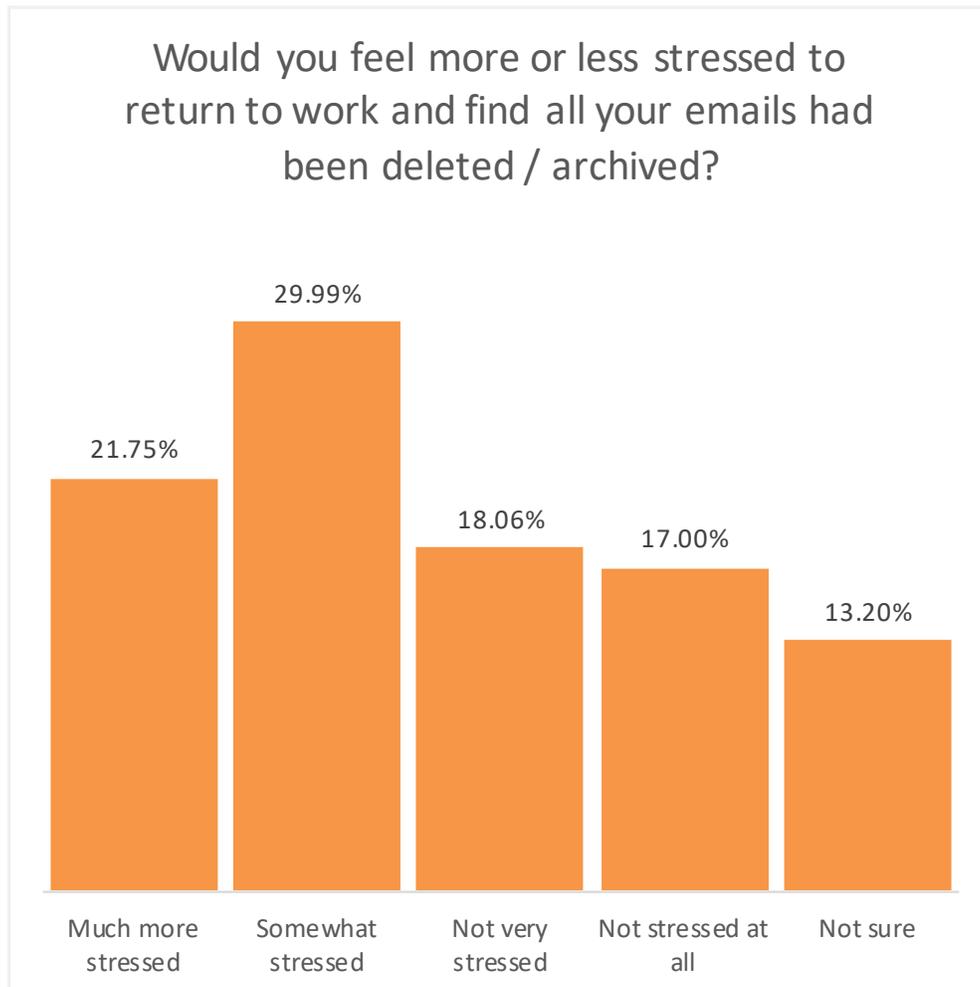
The majority of those are in the South East and East of England. They also predominantly work in the financial and HR sectors. It’s also noteworthy that scarcely any HR workers believe they could clear their inbox within a single working day.

In contrast, around 60 percent of those in the East Midlands estimate it would take less than a day to hit the coveted “Inbox Zero.” Of all sectors sampled, those working in the education sector were most bullish about being able to clear their email in a single working day.

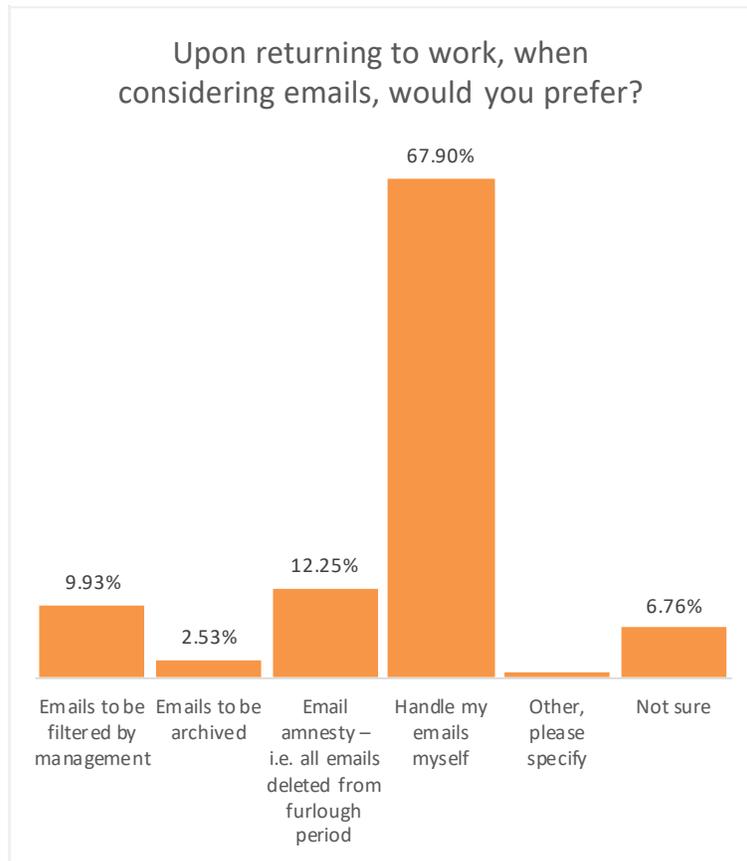




Despite those daunting numbers, the majority of respondents said they'd express some level of stress if they returned to work to find their emails had been deleted or archived. Just under 20 percent said they would feel completely unfazed.

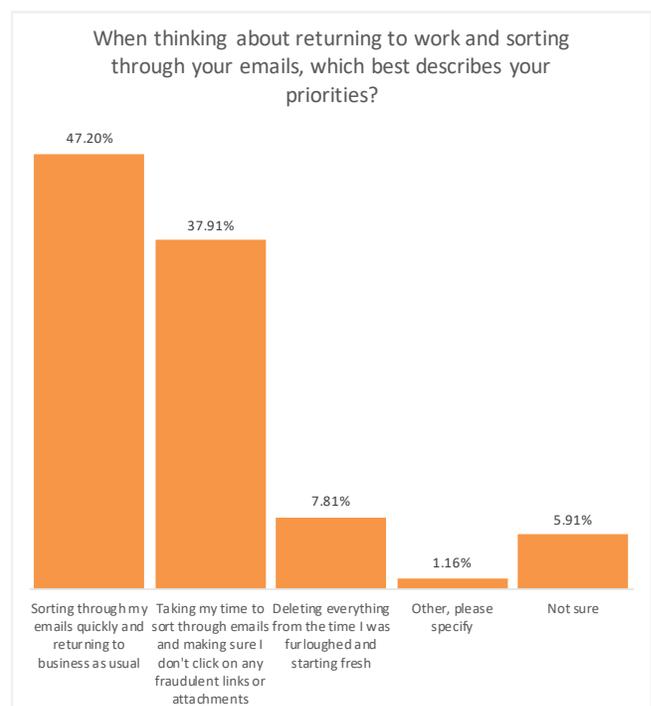


And our results suggested an overwhelming level of enthusiasm for workers handling their emails themselves. Under 70 percent of respondents said they would rather deal with their backlog. Just ten percent said they'd be content for management to triage their inbox, with support for an "email amnesty" just scarcely higher.

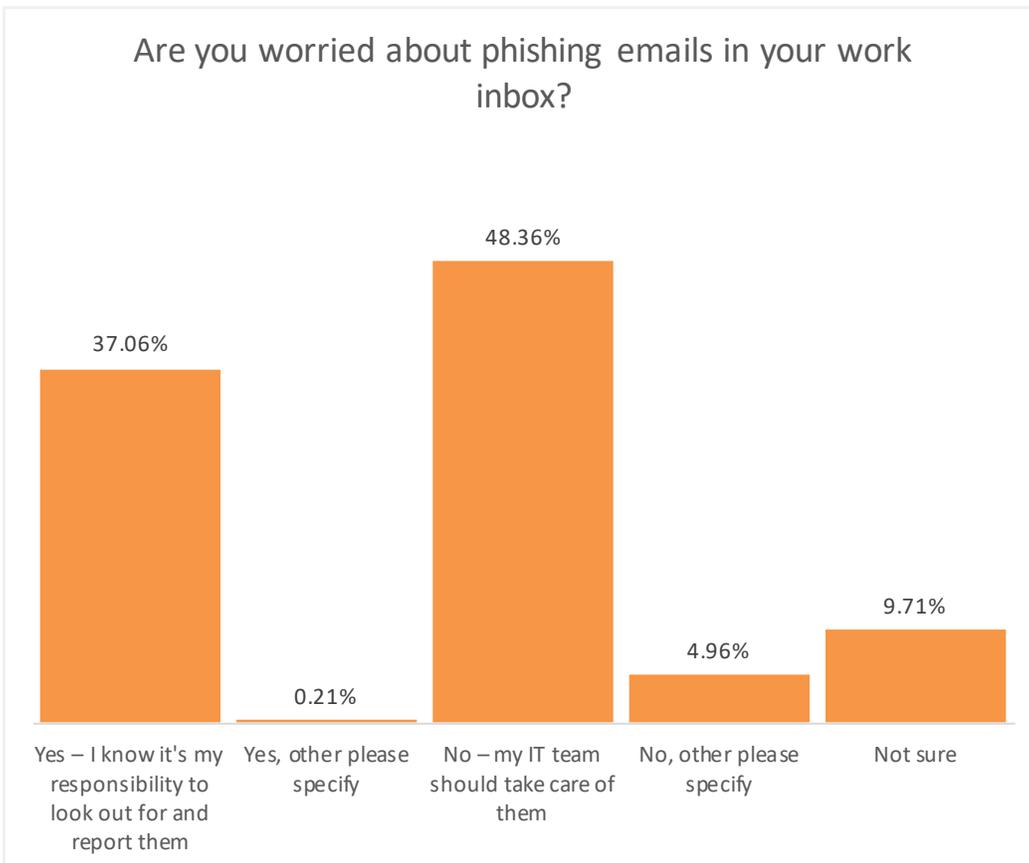
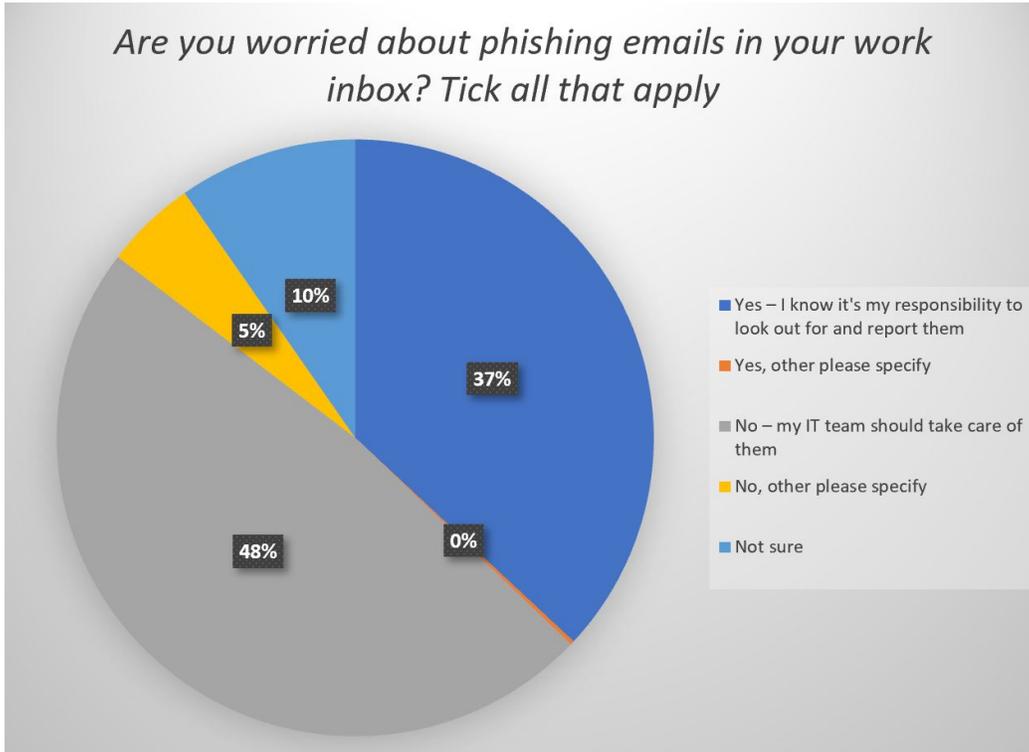


PART 2 – PHISHING & SECURITY AWARENESS

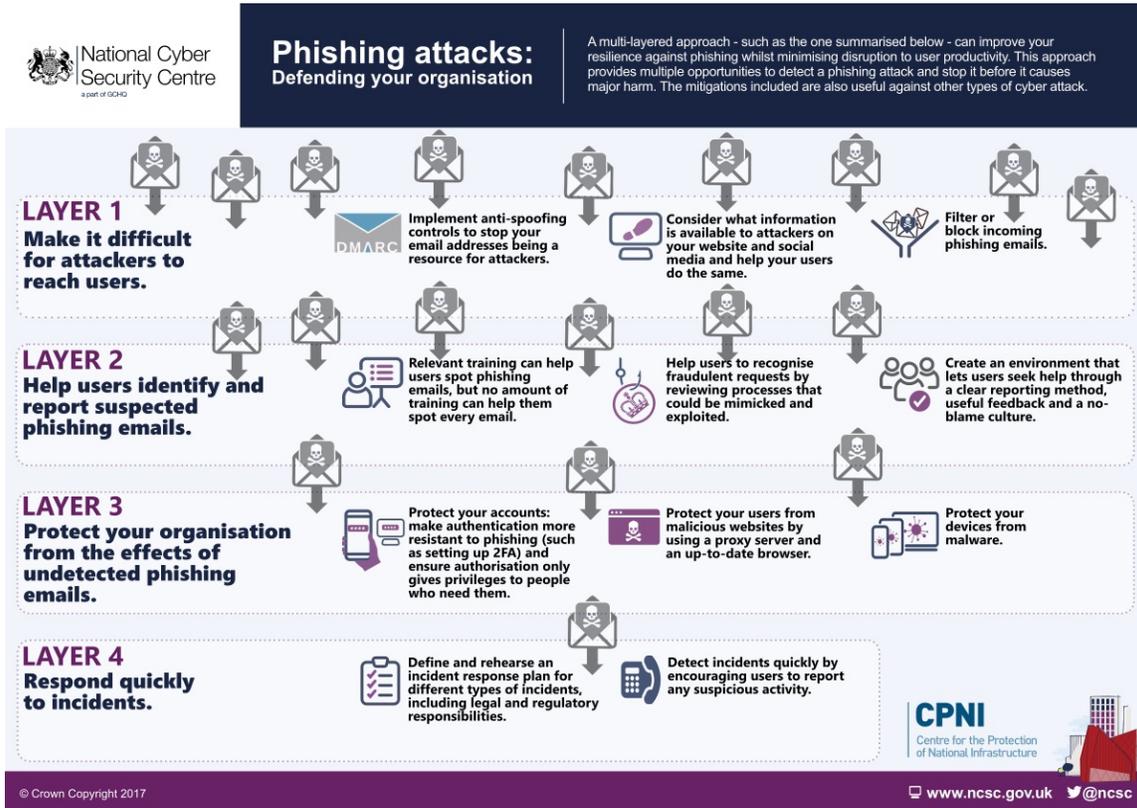
Perhaps unsurprisingly, security isn't the primary concern for furloughed employees, with nearly 50 percent reporting an eagerness to return to "business as usual". Around 38 percent said they'd take their time to ensure they aren't ensnared by a fraudulent link or malware-laced attachment.



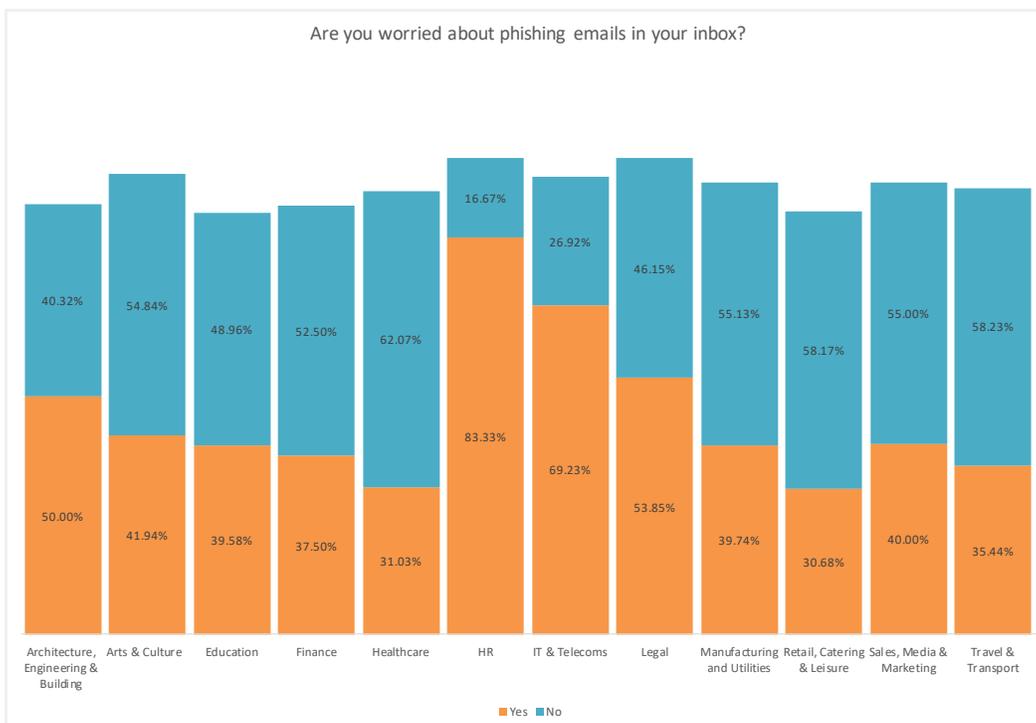
That's arguably because they don't regard security as their problem. Only 37 percent of respondents accepted they had an individual responsibility for the organisation's information security, with 48 percent saying that protecting workers against phishing emails is the concern of the IT team.



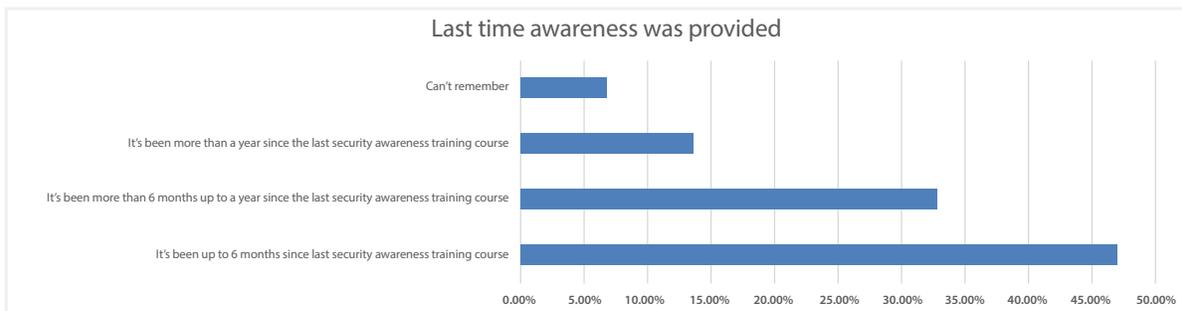
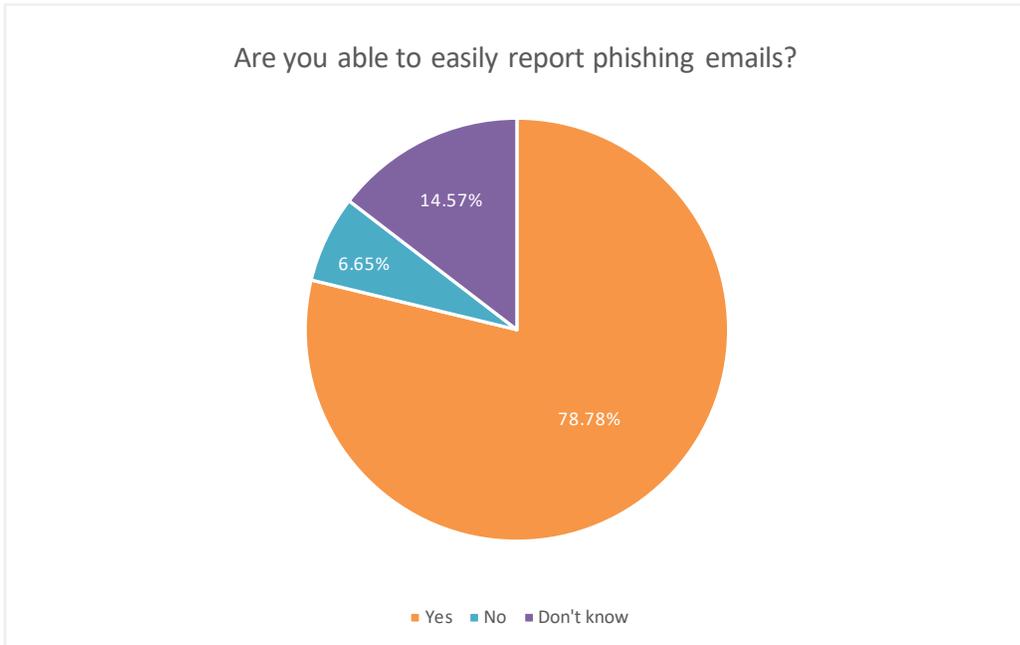
And while that perhaps might be the case in an ideal world, it doesn't really bear out in reality. Phishing emails are increasingly sophisticated and able to circumvent technological controls. It also doesn't reflect the official guidance from the UK's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), which states that both IT teams and individual workers have a role to play in fighting phishing.



It's worth mentioning that concern for phishing varies between sectors. Perhaps predictably, workers in HR, IT, and telecoms are those with the greatest anxieties, while healthcare, retail, catering, and leisure workers are more blasé.

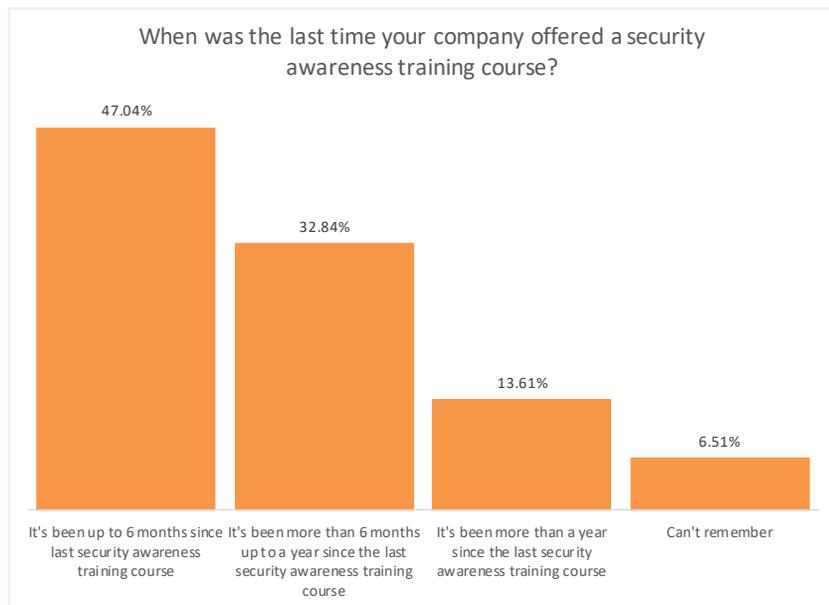


Although nearly 75 percent of workers claimed to be aware of processes to report phishing emails, overall infosec training appears to be lax. Astonishingly, two-thirds of respondents report they have never been offered the opportunity to attend a security awareness course.

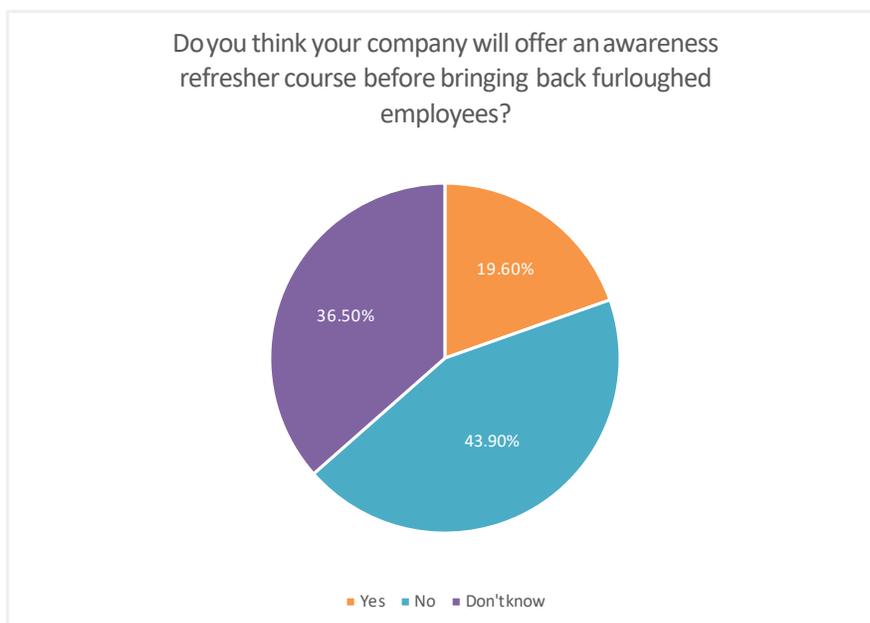


And for those who said they'd attended such a course, it's likely a distant memory. Over 30 percent said it had been over six months since the last one, with nearly 15 percent having reported they'd gone over a year without being briefed on the latest security threats and protocols.





And training is unlikely to be forthcoming for those furloughed employees, with nearly half saying they don't expect to receive a security refresher course upon their return to work.



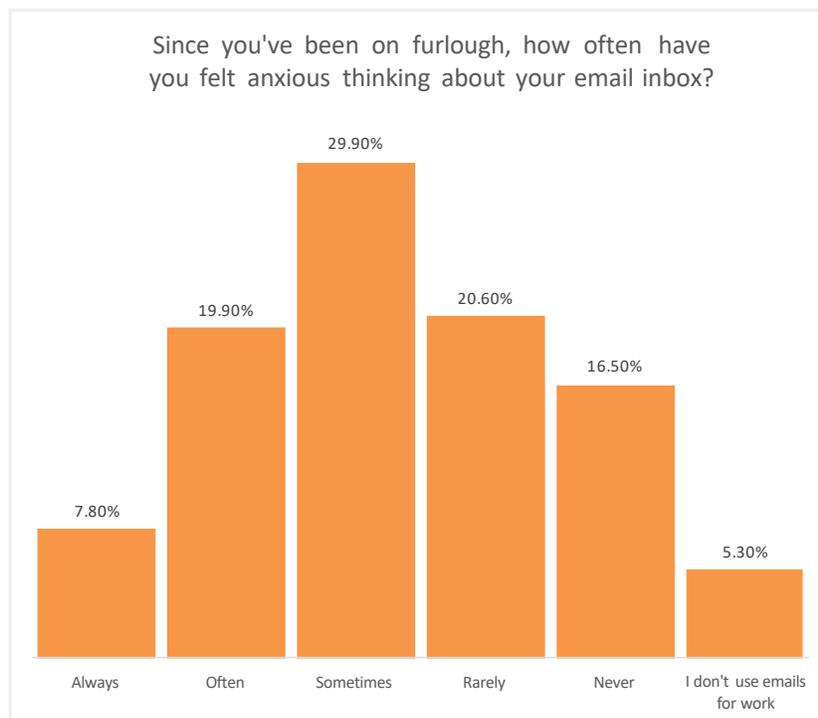
The evidence suggests people are overconfident in their organisation's ability — and, indeed, their own — to identify and safely handle phishing emails. As per the 2020 phishing by industry benchmark report by KnowBe4, between 25 and 30 percent of an untrained workforce in the UK & Ireland will likely fall victim to a phishing email.

UK & IRELAND	BASELINE	90 DAYS	1 YEAR
1-249	28.7%	13.8%	3.8%
250-999	27%	13.6%	6.1%
1000+	22.8%	14.1%	4.1%
Average PPP Across All Organisation Sizes	26.7%	13.9%	4.7%

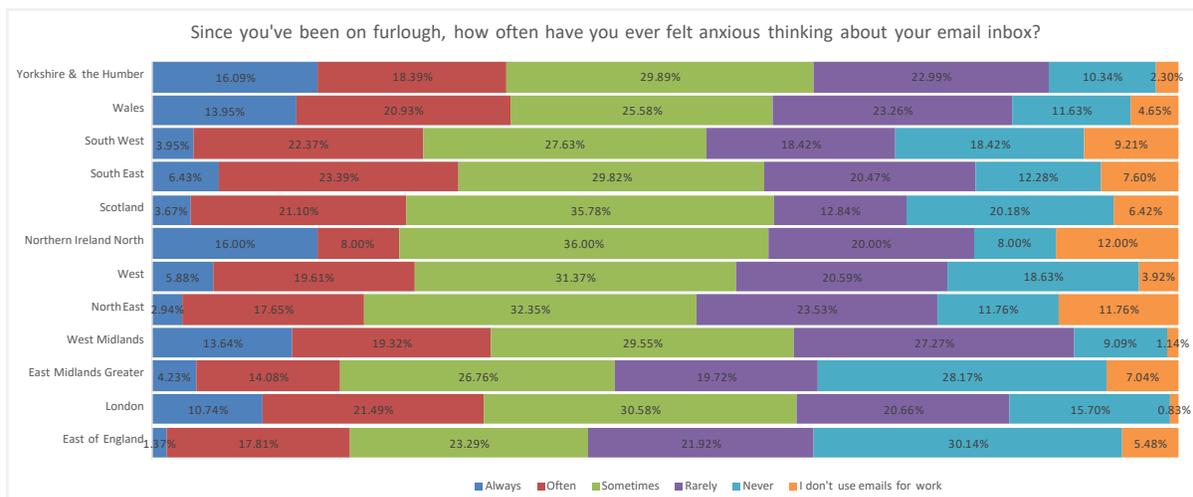
However, with consistent security awareness and training, this can come down to less than 15 percent in 90 days, and below five percent over the course of a year. This presents a clear business case for organisations to invest in security awareness training, particularly when faced with a workforce returning from a potentially lengthy period on furlough.

PART 3 – THE HUMAN TOUCH

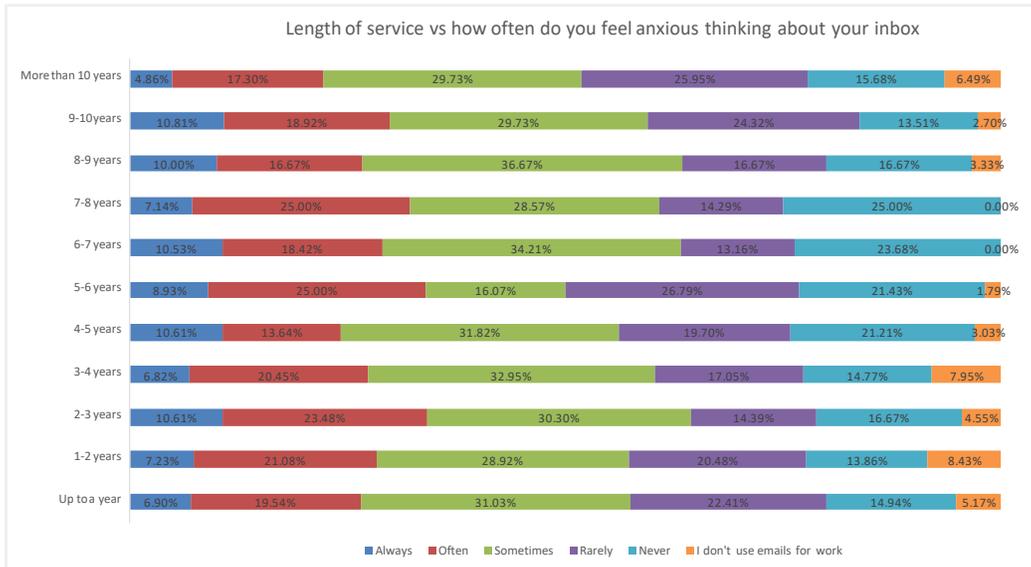
You can take the employee from the workplace, but in this hyper-connected era, you can't really take the workplace from the employee. Despite furloughed employees being prohibited from performing any meaningful work for their employers, their inbox still lingers in their mind, with the majority of respondents reporting feeling some level of stress about their email backlog.



There's a geographical divide here. Those living in Yorkshire and the Humber, Northern Ireland, and the West Midlands expressed feeling the most anxiety about their work. Those in the East of England, however, reported feeling comparatively sanguine, with nearly 30 percent saying they're "never" stressed about their unattended inbox, and just under two percent saying they're "always" worried about it.



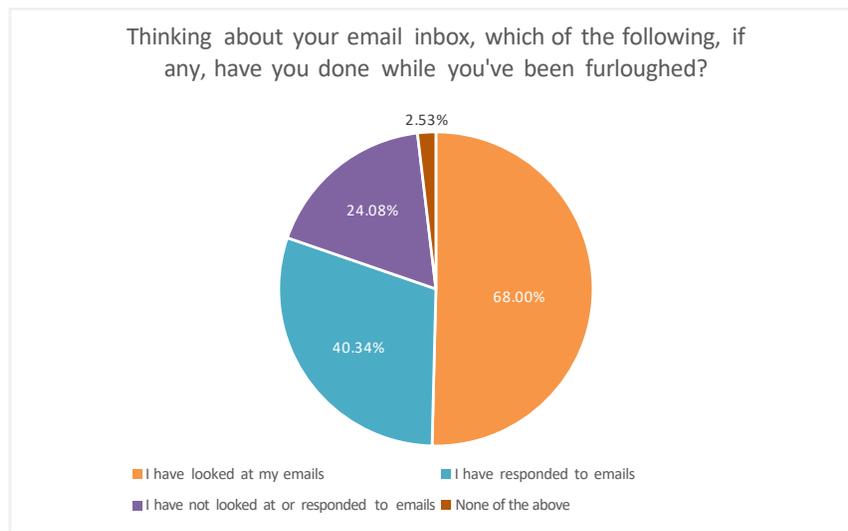
That said, there's no real correlation between anxiety and length of service. Regardless of your tenure or seniority, it appears most people have some concern about their bulging Outlook folders.



Those who reported feeling “sometimes” or “often” anxious did so for a variety of reasons. Half of those surveyed said they're anxious about returning to a burdensome backlog of email, as well as the potential to miss time-sensitive communications. Less than 40 percent said they're worried about getting behind on work.



And it's likely these anxieties are prompting some to break the rules surrounding furlough, with over three-quarters of respondents claiming to have read or replied to emails.



CONCLUSIONS

Despite being temporarily liberated from their day-to-day employee responsibilities, work remains a pressing concern for Britain's furloughed workforce. And given the importance of email in the modern workplace, it makes sense that this facet is a major point of anxiety.

While it's easy to recommend employees don't check emails while on furlough, the reality is that the anxiety is real. Whether checking emails while on furlough or facing a mountain of emails upon returning to work, they should be mindful that danger could be lurking in emails. Having a process in place could help – sorting emails by sender, by topic, or priority can help to ensure the most important and safe emails are responded to the quickest. Any suspicious or unexpected emails should be reported to IT or filed separately so they can be examined more closely once time is freed up.

When workplaces start welcoming their employees back, they're inevitably going to be under pressure to catch up with all their missed correspondence. And that pressure has the potential to introduce security liabilities, particularly as workers rush to catch up on several months of unread emails. Workplaces would therefore be wise to implement technologies that can mitigate the risk of phishing.

Leaders would also be wise to offer security training. With employees having been detached from their working lives, it couldn't hurt to offer a refresher on the basics that have perhaps been forgotten under lockdown.

Above all, it's worth remembering that those returning furloughed workers have been through a stressful, traumatic experience. If things go wrong, respond with empathy and support — not anger and blame.

Additional Resources



About KnowBe4

KnowBe4 is the world's largest integrated Security Awareness Training and Simulated Phishing platform. Realising that the human element of security was being seriously neglected, KnowBe4 was created to help organisations manage the problem of social engineering through a comprehensive new-school awareness training approach.

This method integrates baseline testing using real-world mock attacks, engaging interactive training, continuous assessment through simulated phishing, and vishing attacks and enterprise-strength reporting, to build a more resilient organisation with security top of mind.

Tens of thousands of organisations worldwide use KnowBe4's platform across all industries, including highly regulated fields such as finance, healthcare, energy, government and insurance to mobilise their end users as a last line of defence and enable them to make better security decisions.

For more information, please visit www.KnowBe4.com