

PERINATAL MENTAL HEALTH IN SMALL BUSINESS

CONSULTATION AND DIGITAL LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

Mental ill-health is a significant issue for many Small Business Owners (SBOs). In 2020, 34% of SBOs reported a medical diagnosis of a mental health condition, including stress, anxiety, or depression in the previous 12 months¹.



FACTORS IMPACTING ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF SBOs INCLUDE:

- Long work hours.
- High work demands.
- Poor work-life balance.
- Blurred boundaries between work and life, e.g. responding to business emails and calls outside of work hours.
- Financial stress, e.g. managing ongoing cash flow, financial issues and the uncertainty of incoming work.
- Holding multiple roles, including the management of administrative and government regulations.
- Burden of responsibility for self and others who work in or are impacted by the business (family and staff members).
- Feelings of isolation, due to the absence of peer networks.

For SBOs in the **perinatal** period, there are a number of additional stressors that can impact mental health. For example, in the leadup to parental leave there is heightened pressure for SBOs to plan effectively to ensure business continuity while taking leave, and on their return, they will likely need to balance childcaring responsibilities with the day-to-day management of their business.

Many of the risk factors highlighted above also extend to staff members, such as working long hours, holding multiple roles or concerns about job security. Many staff members in this setting are unaware of available support, resources or leave entitlements, and experience feelings of guilt or uncertainty about taking leave due to the impact on others in the business.

These stressors can increase the vulnerability of new and expectant parents at a time when they are already at increased risk of perinatal mental health distress.



1 in 5 mums and
1 in 10 dads suffer
from perinatal
anxiety and/or
depression.

The Cost of PNDA in Australia, 2019



SUPPORTING PERINATAL MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

The **workplace** represents a valuable opportunity to reach new and expectant parents at this vulnerable stage, including fathers and non-birth parents who may not have regular interaction with frontline perinatal health services.

With one-third of adult life spent at work, the workplace is an ideal context to promote mental health and reduce the impact and severity of mental ill-health.

Raising awareness and providing targeted resources to support this transition through the workplace increases the capacity for new and expectant parents to more effectively plan for their transition to parenthood and return to work following the arrival of their child. It is this intentional planning around the transition that leads to better mental health outcomes during the perinatal period.

Furthermore, through our previous work in the Victorian-based Perinatal Workplace Wellbeing Program (PWWP) funded by WorkSafe's WorkWell Mental Health Improvement Fund, we know that **supervisory support** is one of the most important work-related factors impacting perinatal mental health.

It is therefore critical that SBOs managing new and expectant parents have the resources and awareness to provide adequate support, particularly given their dual role in supporting their staff while managing the continuity of the business during the parental leave period, and/or becoming a parent themselves.

INTRODUCING THE AUSTRALIAN PERINATAL WORKPLACE WELLBING PROGRAM (APWWP)

Small businesses are typically limited in resources, time and expertise to support this important and often challenging work-life transition.

The APWWP, delivered in partnership with COPE and Pracademia, is designed to improve the mental health and wellbeing of expectant and new parents in Australia by providing small business owners and their staff members with an online platform that provides practical tools, resources and information to support the transition to parenthood.

The program will be focused on streamlining and simplifying the steps required to manage the transition well, from both the business and the staff member perspective. It will include 'just in time' resources across the parental leave transition, from announcement of pregnancy/adoption to returning to the workplace.

It will also include tools and resources to support increased awareness of perinatal mental health issues more generally and provide referral pathways for those who need additional support.

To develop a digital platform that meets the needs of small business owners and their staff members, we have consulted Small Business Owners and conducted a Digital Landscape Analysis. This report summarises our key findings and the implications for product design and development.

97%
of Australian workplaces are small businesses employing fewer than 20 people.

ABS Counts of Australian Business 8165.0, Table 13, February 2020



PART 1: SMALL BUSINESS CONSULTATION

To better understand the unique issues facing SBOs and their staff members during the perinatal period, we conducted one-on-one interviews with SBOs across the pharmacy, accounting and hairdressing industries.

The consultation centred on the nature of the SBO's relationship with their business and their staff members, and implications for the perinatal period:

- **'The business is my baby':** SBOs identified that their businesses felt like 'their baby' and coupled with this was a desire to tightly control and manage the detail of the business operations. This led many to feel reluctant to delegate or step away from work during the transition to parenthood.
- **The SBO as central to the business structure:** Given the central role owners play in small business, significant planning and delegation is required to manage the transition to parenthood effectively and ensure business continuity.
- **Small workforce:** The limited resources inherent in small business, including a smaller workforce, led to an added pressure when SBOs manage their own or other's parental leave, making it harder for the load to be covered by existing staff.

Other themes that emerged in consultation with SBOs included:

- The strong work ethic and high expectations of SBOs.
- Personal connection to customers.
- Limited financial support available for staff members taking parental leave.
- Challenges associated with navigating boundaries.
- Lack of awareness of legal obligations and options available to support staff members.
- The challenge of supporting the ongoing seasons of working parenthood.
- The shift in expectations across generations.

Specific themes for the pharmacy, accounting and hairdressing industries are also detailed below.

WHEN A BUSINESS OWNER IS TRANSITIONING TO PARENTHOOD

'The business is my baby'

SBOs told us, 'My business is my baby', into which they have poured time, love and money. It is hard to let go.

"You have these kinds of control-freaky, micromanage-y tendencies that do come out. And you can't help it, because you become so attached to everything that you've created. And at the end of the day, everything falls down on you."

"The weakness of the business is I'm too involved. The business is only about me. It's not working."

"You are used to working at a frequency of working solid 10-hour days, and ... when you're a small business owner, it's your baby."

"I've got my business, which is my livelihood, that's my baby, and I'm the forefront of that. But then I've also got this new role that I'm transitioning into. I've definitely found that there's like this state of overwhelm of like, you kind of can't see through the mud a little bit and you just kind of go, go, go, go, go."

There is a smaller workforce to cover the load—so SBOs just keep on going.

With a small number of employees, it is challenging for any absences be covered by existing staff, and recruiting, training and onboarding places a heavy burden on businesses.

As a result, SBOs told us they often chose not to backfill temporary absences. Instead, they continued to juggle multiple roles, manage high workloads and/or return to work sooner than they desired—on top of managing the transition to parenthood.

"I left [to go on parental leave], but then there was a big job and I'm the only one who could really do it. So when [my baby] was 12 weeks, I had to go back and do it—we didn't have the resources to let that client go."

"If the staff member leaves, then I have to cover their workload until I can find a replacement. And then finding a replacement takes time. And training them up or getting them on board takes time. And I don't have time to deal with that. So I'd rather just know, 'This is my workload, I'm the one who has to deal with it'. And I have more control when it's like that."



The SBO is central to the business structure

Small businesses often have a flat structure, with many tasks completed or overseen by the SBO. They told us they value being in control of the business operations and may not have had the need, or desire, to delegate to others in the past.

They are also acutely aware that they are ultimately responsible for everything that happens in the business.

“Throughout the pregnancy, you just hope nothing goes wrong. Because if the baby ends up being premature, what do you do as a business owner?”

“I feel like every small business owner kind of has grabbed the reins of their business that little bit tighter and pulled it a little bit closer [during COVID]. Because there have been so many times of uncertainty that you kind of just can't help but grab on to it and just go, 'I need to hold onto this and make sure everything's going to be okay.'”

“It's almost like you have to mentally get your head around the fact that you actually, physically, need to step aside a little bit, and you can't control every single thing.”

“I think part of it is that control freak type of thing. Running a business, you have to do everything yourself... I couldn't really just step away. Everyone still wanted me to be there.”

“I think that is the key to being able to do everything: go back to work, have a baby is just being really organized and delegating... before, I tried to do all that myself.”

Strong work ethic and high expectations result in high emotional demands

SBOs often have a strong work ethic and high expectations that place significant emotional demands on them. They expressed difficulty with 'letting go' during parental leave.

They highlighted the challenges associated with finding their new normal, and of balancing the priorities of work and family life in this transition.

“I still go, go, go, go, go. Because I kind of just don't know any different.”

“I think I thought I could do it all and just go back and be Wonder Woman.”

“Because I've worked all my life, it was a lot better for me mentally if I go back to work. Because that's all I know, really.”

They have personal connections to customers

Small businesses often have deep roots in their communities. There is genuine care between SBOs and their customers or clients, and that can make it difficult for business owners to step back from the business. This is an added emotional demand for many owners as they plan for the arrival of their baby.

“I had to keep on top of the deadlines [immediately after having a baby]. There were some clients that I had to get their tax returns done so they were able to apply for JobKeeper.”

“You never want to disappoint your client. You never want to disappoint your team.”

“We get attached to clients. We really do.”



WHEN A BUSINESS OWNER HAS A STAFF MEMBER TRANSITIONING TO PARENTHOOD

There is a lack of awareness around legal obligations and entitlements

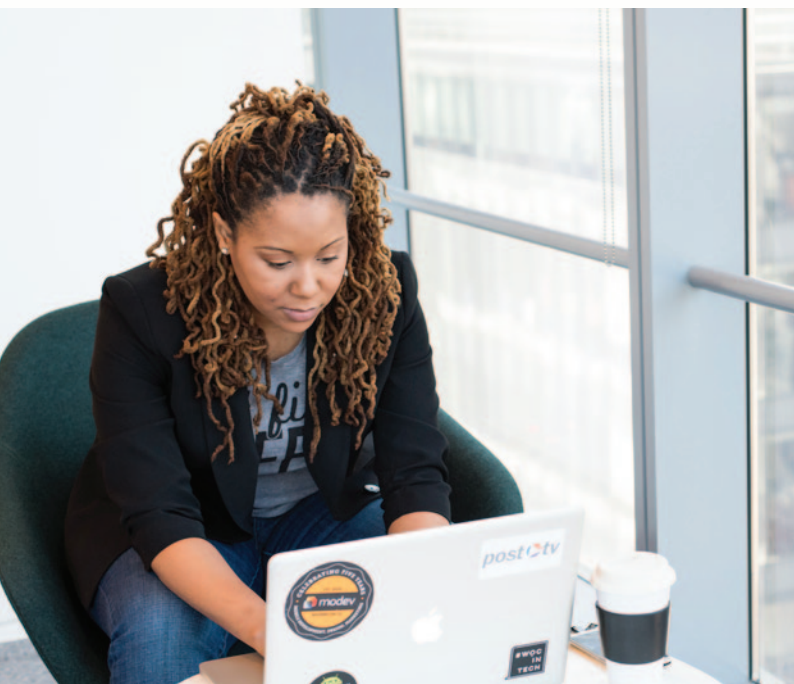
Business owners referred to a lack of awareness around legal obligations and entitlements. They often have to learn rapidly when the situation emerges for the first time.

“I haven’t had a staff member who was pregnant or was planning to have a child until now. Now, she just hit me one day with that saying, “Look, I will have a child in the next few years. What is the situation work-wise?” And I was literally stunned for a minute. I didn’t know what to say. I had, at that point, not familiarised myself at all with maternity leave or anything like that, and then quite quickly realised there is actually no such thing in hairdressing or in small businesses. I have not really got an idea how to talk to her about it, how to bring it up.”

There is a need to remain agile

Business owners highlighted it is often difficult to create structures and policies in an ever-changing small business environment. As such, there is a tendency to respond to situations reactively, rather than planning ahead.

“There’s only so much structure and planning. I think when you are dealing with so many moving, people components, every day there’s so much stuff that just constantly comes up ... That we just have to learn to be, I don’t know, a little bit flexible and have that ability to pivot and move and change things as it needs to happen.”



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If [the transition] could be led by the business, that would be amazing. I think that when you first fall pregnant, it’s information overload. As an employer, I would like to say, ‘Thank you for letting me know ... here’s a little checklist for you. Go sign up to this website ...’

Financial support is limited, but there are other ways to support staff

Small businesses are unable to compete with larger corporates in terms of the financial support that is offered. There appears to be a need to highlight the non-financial support that small businesses can provide.

“In small businesses, there’s no such thing as actually just paying a salary while you are away for a year, or half a year ... as a small business, we can’t really do that. There’s government funding you can access, but that’s kind of it. [My employee] has a lot of friends who are all in the corporate world where the situation often looks very, very different.”

“I would love to employ people in future and have a transitioning format as part of the employment process. I would like to have that as part of our bonus structure or our reward system that’s saying, ‘Okay, yes, we offer great commission. We offer flexibility with days off and holidays and Saturdays off. But also, if you ever wish to start a family, these are the things we are going to offer you as well.’ That’s something I would present to all my male and female staff, any staff member. That’s just part of the package of being employed by us”.

Conversations about returning to work can be challenging

Business owners want to support their people—and help them manage their own expectations as new working parents—without implying pressure to return, but those conversations can be hard to navigate well.

“My biggest concern was I always want to ensure that my employees have as much leeway in returning to work at their discretion. But you’ve also got to be super careful about proactively contacting them about that once they’ve taken their leave, because you don’t want to place this burden on them where they think, ‘Well, I better come back to work quickly.’ So it’s a real balancing act between being open and saying to them, ‘Whenever you are ready, we are ready,’ without making that message seem like, ‘Hey, I’m ready now, please come back quickly,’ type of thing.”

“Because I don’t want to overstep my boundaries, and I don’t want them to feel uncomfortable like I’m not supporting their decision, or I don’t want them back. It’s just hard sometimes having those conversations with [parents] returning. And making them just understand what is actually going to be realistic.”

“For my staff, having been a mom, I wish I’d made it clearer that they could ask for different types of leave in terms of time to express, or do breastfeeding stuff, or to just set the expectation, not have the pressure on them to think that they had to return.”

“I want people to come back and be honest with what they’re actually going to be capable of doing. And I think for some people that’s a hard thing for them to discover. They don’t know what they’re going to be capable of until they try it.”



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I guess it’s hard to be flexible when you have children because even now, I’ve only got so many hours that I can give to work.

Ongoing seasons of working parenthood

Beyond the perinatal period, there are ongoing challenges for small businesses in providing flexible working options for parents as the seasons of parenthood change and work-life priorities adjust.

“When their bub’s around age three or four, [parents] start to realise that their kid’s going to be in school the year after ... And so there’s this realisation that they need to return to more day hours, but then meeting their expectations around school holidays or school hours again, it can be quite difficult to achieve that balance as well.”

“I guess it’s hard to be flexible when you have children because even now, I’ve only got so many hours that I can give to work. I can’t make up those hours. I can’t do overtime or I can’t go, ‘Oh, I’ll just catch up on in the evening or I’ll catch up on the weekend’, because there is no weekend and there is no evening to ... There’s no time to catch up.”

“Once your kids arrive, you realise that it’s actually not the case.” (adoptive parent)



ACCOUNTING-SPECIFIC THEMES

Gender disparity

Accounting is a male-dominated field, where awareness of perinatal issues may be lower than other industries.

“I think it’s more that their generation, our bosses’ generation, they’re older accountants probably. That’s very different. Like, the females just do the housework or look after the kids. And so I reckon they quite don’t know how to deal with that. Like they don’t want to be mean or anything. It’s not about that. It’s more like they just don’t know.”

Inflexible calendar

Given the constraints of the financial calendar and pre-defined busy periods across the year, there are certain times when it is more challenging to take extended parental leave. This can place additional burden on individuals to follow a specific timeline for their parental leave or place pressure on individuals to return to work to meet their work demands before they feel ready.

“Because we’re in a compliance-based industry ... every accountant knows their crunch time every single year.”

“It has to do with the tax timing. So, my first was born in May. And so I did my best to wrap up everything before the baby was born. And so it’s towards the end of a financial year and those [tax returns] that I couldn’t do, I just had to say, ‘You got to find someone else to do it for you ...’”

This was particularly pertinent for those who experienced a challenging journey to parenthood.

“The first round of IVF failed ... And so it’s very difficult to then plan. After we got married, we were going to have children and we thought it was going to happen straight away. And so if everything happened naturally and to schedule, then you can plan it. But when things don’t, if there’s no schedule, if there’s things beyond your control, how can you plan it?”

“Things can change really quickly. You might have an amazing pregnancy and it might be happy days and you might be kicking goals and that’s fantastic, but if that doesn’t happen to you and it’ll change really quickly, then do you have the right systems and structures in place that it’s not ... going to really seriously, financially impact your business.”



Exposure to clients’ trauma

Supporting clients with precarious financial and personal situations can take its toll, increasing emotional demands at a time when individuals are already at increased risk of mental health distress.

“We’ve got auditors who are about to turn up for an audit because the client knows that okay, the gig is up, basically, then they just kill themselves. That happens in our profession, but not many people talk about the trauma that we deal with.”

“I guess what we do, people don’t realise oh, business accountants, they’re just crunching numbers. That’s absolutely not true. Because we see everything from divorce and sometimes I think I have trauma, second-hand trauma, from seeing clients. Because during COVID and their businesses, their marriage failing and all that liquidation and that stuff. We hold their hands.”

Client relationship maintenance

Accountants will often work with specific clients for long periods, and there can be pressure to maintain and support client relationships with always being available. This can lead to feelings of guilt associated with taking leave and/or prevent people from stepping away from work to manage their transition to parenthood.

“The client was going through a really tough stage with COVID and they’re facing liquidation and they’re going to lose their houses and cars and everything else. And I’ve got a really good relationship with this client, and I can’t just sit there and let that happen.”

HAIRDRESSING-SPECIFIC THEMES

Lack of contingency and flexibility for working parents

The need to fill appointments booked by clients can make it difficult to accommodate last-minute flexibility for parents of young children.

“You’re in an industry where you’re client based. So you have appointments. And if you have that sort of uncertainty happening in your personal life, where you might not be able to go to work at short notice, or just these other priorities, it can be really hard to sort of navigate having a booked out column. And there’s a pressure that comes with that.”

“I want people to come back and be actually honest with what they’re actually going to be capable of doing. And I think for some people that’s a hard thing for them to discover. They don’t know what they’re going to be capable of until they try it. So then, from a business perspective, that can be tricky, because you want to keep as much consistency across the board for the clients and for the rest of the team and having somebody who might be a little bit unsteady and unsure can have a little bit of a ripple effect in the team.”

“What I have found is probably the common thread ... is that for a lot of young girls who do fall pregnant and go on to have children, a lot of them don’t tend to necessarily return. I think they look at that as if, I’m just going to go do something that’s a bit easier ... where there’s a good casual option that’s easy for them to do, or a really 9 to 5 sort of work setting where [they] just show up and they’re accountable for their work, but they’re not having to worry about clients and appointments and things like that.”

“So it’s not like, I would say, maybe in an office where you can say, ‘I’m going to do that task tomorrow,’ or ‘I can pass that task onto another staff member.’ With us, it’s very much, ‘There is Helen and Elizabeth booked in. They want to see Alex.’ Alex is not here. We have to find another spot for them.”



High emotional demands

Being customer facing, there is a need for staff members to emotionally regulate and project positivity and warmth in their customer interactions. This extends to interactions with team members, given the close working quarters of many salons. This may create extra emotional demands for new parents who may be tired, stressed, or suffering from perinatal depression or anxiety.

“I think the challenging thing was just being so tired, being pregnant and then having to still maintain everything. Obviously, [as] a hairdresser, you can’t have sick days anyway, but you still have to maintain the status of being a boss, being everybody’s go-to person. No breaks because running a salon is so busy.”

“Human nature, I think we feed off each other, so that’s one thing. I think if somebody was continually feeling horrible every day, feeling sick, feeling down, feeling whatever, I think that would affect the day-to-day energy.”

“

I think the challenging thing was just being so tired, being pregnant and then having to still maintain everything.

PHARMACY-SPECIFIC THEMES

Gender disparity

Predominantly female workforce, however managers and owners are predominantly male.

"I think also from the perspective of the fact that even though 70% of our profession is female, most pharmacy owners are actually men, so they may not have the same insight level as a female owner. I think 70% of pharmacies are owned by men, but 70% of pharmacists are women."

"In Pharmacy, less than 15% of owners, so leaders, in our industry are female. And, certainly, the best leaders I have had in this space have been people who have had babies and become parents themselves. They are much more empathetic."

High stress work

Pharmacy is a high-stress environment, with a high level of cognitive and analytical skills required.

This environment can make it difficult for people who are pregnant or undergoing IVF to take the time off they need for medical appointments. Additionally, when they are adjusting to the return to work, it can create extra pressure.

For pharmacists who are facing infertility or have recently experienced pregnancy loss, stress can be amplified when dealing with new parents or patients who are pregnant as they struggle with their own grief.

"I found it very, very stressful so I just quit."

"It's a bit anxiety provoking for a lot of women, particularly because we return to work with a very high level of responsibility automatically. In community pharmacy, there's not much in the way of working from home or anything like that. You're in with the patient there in front of you, the role is in itself, a high responsibility role, and there's not really an in-between."

"Obviously, we all make mistakes, the pharmacists do as well. And I made a not very good mistake not long after my daughter was born, because I just didn't check something properly that another pharmacist had done. And I was really hard on myself after that. It really knocked my confidence significantly. And so that does happen just because you're so tired."

"It's a high risk thing and you do feel the pressure, and when the stuff goes wrong, which statistically it will, because the more people you look after, the more likely you are to make a mistake ... It is hard to reconcile that at the time, just kind of get really frustrating. You're like, 'Oh, I need to work, I need to support my family, but I don't want to hurt people by being at work:'"

"It's just kind of that increased risk of being tired and maybe not being as analytical as you might be ordinarily, or just having a fuzzy brain from everything going on. Now that I've got my second child, my expectations on myself are a bit lower. I'm kinder to myself. I don't try and work longer shifts."



High work demands

The level of demand is such that pharmacists are incredibly busy and work under pressure to perform their role as quickly as possible.

"They just want them to make money and get scripts out ... For example, the early career pharmacist is trying to check everything and go real slow and careful. Some employers, especially at the bigger discount chains, say things like, 'Oh my gosh, a 12 year old off the street could dispense faster than you:'"

High physical demands

Pharmacists spend a lot of their shift on their feet, retrieving files and medication from shelves, going up steps and bending down regularly. This can place additional physical strain on women during the perinatal period.

"In pharmacy, there are lots of deliveries and things like that. So you have some considerations that way. I had to tell staff earlier [that I was pregnant] at the pharmacy, because of things like lifting and things like that ..."

"One of the things is, you're always on your feet. You're moving around all the time. You're up and down ... And you are moving around within a defined space, that is, the dispensary and the professional service area in order to counsel people. So you are on your feet and moving around a lot. As rough guide, I used to wear a Fitbit and I would do 10,000 steps a day easily."

Maintaining registration

Stringent professional development requirements for ongoing registration as a pharmacist can present a significant challenge for workers who take parental leave and need to continue managing professional development hours across their parental leave or 'catch up' on hours when they return to work.

Additionally, the cost of maintaining registration was identified by some as a barrier to staying in the profession after the perinatal period.

"It would be really difficult if you let your registration lapse ... you would probably have to undergo training, and if not undergo further education definitely supervised practice. However, to keep your registration up you can just work ... You could take six months off or 12 months off, as long as you do 450 hours in the last three years."

"We have to remain registered. We have a registration fee that we pay every year. We have a requirement for the amount of experience that we attain every year to maintain our competence. And one of the biggest issues within our industry is that when a person takes extended leave, and this primarily affects when you go on maternity leave, because that's the most often reason for somebody to step away from the pharmacy for any length of the time."

"The older the workforce gets the more male it gets. And that is both due to extended periods of time where people decide, 'Well, I just won't return to pharmacy because it's, there's a cost in maintaining my registration and I want to have a family of a certain size and I'm just going to have those kids in close proximity to each other.' And so they'd take this extended period of time after then they'd say, 'Well, there's this real barrier of entry of getting back into that work, I'm just going to not do that.'"

"It's still a cost to maintain your registration, despite potentially not having a current income. It's still a cost to access that ongoing training that you're required to meet throughout that time ... And if you don't maintain it, then what ends up happening is if you take off an extended period of time, when you come back, you've actually got to prove your competence again. That's a fair bit unfair to people to have to go through that process. It is one of those aspects of the profession ... it disproportionately affects women."



Skill shortage

The high level of demand for pharmacists and current skill shortage means that employers are willing to offer flexible working hours to retain staff.

"Right now, at the community pharmacy market there's high demand for pharmacists so the employers will be willing to be very flexible right now."

"You can get full time work relatively easily, and you can get locum work, which is very casual, you could be in different suburbs every day of the week, for instance, or you can get an extended period of time. But that middle place of part-time work, two or three days a week, can be a bit more competitive I guess."

"There's a bit of a workforce shortage. So as an employer ... If I still had the pharmacy and I had somebody on maternity leave and they said to me, 'I'd really love to be helping one day a month or something and come back and do that.' Not only would I be happy to do that, but at this current time, I'd probably be needing it."

Self-treatment

As in other health professions, there can be a temptation for pharmacists to manage their own health conditions and to self diagnose or to self treat. This can place pharmacists at greater risk during the perinatal period given the limited perspective inherent with self-treatment.

"It's well understood that health professionals don't actually act as very good health professionals to themselves and to their own family because ... you can't separate yourself. So you give yourself bad advice. You don't consider all the issues. But when you are providing advice to other people who are in that same situation, you get that perspective on it."

PART 2: DIGITAL LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

To review the current digital landscape, we considered 31 websites that included digital resources that are focused on Australian small businesses and target the wellbeing of new and expectant parents in the workplace.



The objectives of the analysis were to:

- 1 Determine how the APWWP project fits into the existing digital resource landscape, including identifying current gaps and synergies with other resources.
- 2 Source ideas and learnings about how to best communicate information to small businesses digitally, including functionality and content, what works and what doesn't.



TARGET AUDIENCE

The target audiences for the APWWP have been defined as:

Small business owners (primary target) who:

- Have a staff member that is a new or expectant parent.
- Are a new or expectant parent themselves.

Staff members in small business (secondary target) who are new or expectant parents.

We define small businesses as those having fewer than 20 staff and/or less than \$2M AUD turnover, inclusive of micro-businesses and sole-traders.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN

Customise content to address market gap

FINDINGS:

There are minimal resources delivering specifically on the needs of small business owners in the context of managing work and parenting.

The digital landscape analysis revealed that there is a broad range of online resources providing general mental health and wellbeing information and support to small business owners, and plenty of information to support new parents from a personal perspective.

However, there is limited information that is targeted at supporting small business owners and their staff in the workplace during the perinatal period.

"[In] our profession, we don't have resources for motherhood ... I mean, there's a lot of things about balance work and all that stuff ... but in the accounting profession people just don't hear about that stuff"

"I think CPAs should have more resources ... because we've got booklets [and] magazines and stuff, but ... it's just more about more resources when we're navigating the work life situation ..."

This finding was supported in consultation where SBOs highlighted that the **available content is too generic** in nature.

SBOs reported feeling fatigued by generic resources, or unable to spend the time modifying it to their circumstances.

They expressed a desire to be able to pick up resources that are tailored to their industry or situation. SBOs indicated an appreciation for hearing from others in their shoes and a desire to understand stories and experiences of people 'just like me'.

"I think the most important thing for me would be hearing stories about other people in my industry and what they did to cope."

"Sometimes I struggle because a lot of the things you read or you see is so stock standard, but in our industry just looks a little bit different."



Resources must be industry-relevant, with a broad range of case studies and real stories.

To deliver on the identified need, we will create content that covers the **five stages of parental leave transition** from a workplace perspective, customising content based on the unique considerations of each industry:

1. **Hidden journeys to parenthood (including infertility, perinatal loss, adoption and surrogacy).**
2. **Preparing for parental leave.**
3. **During leave.**
4. **Returning from leave.**
5. **Ongoing seasons of parenting.**

These resources will include checklists, tip sheets, conversation guides, case studies and stories.



ENHANCE ENGAGEMENT BY ELEVATING USER EXPERIENCE

FINDINGS:

Useability is hampered by poor navigation, lack of optimisation for handheld devices, limited (or no) interactivity, and few modes of engagement.

Approximately 51% of website traffic in Australia originates from a handheld device, yet many websites are not optimised for mobile and tablet².

Additionally, the analysis revealed that many of the current resources are text-heavy and do not capitalise on the multiple ways that consumers interact with content online, e.g. podcasts, webinars, written articles and videos. This is likely to lead to low engagement for a time-poor audience.

"100%. I'll be the first one to sign up. If I have a very simple formula like, 'Okay, this is the formula for the business owner and this is for the staff member, that would be such an incredible help.'"

IMPLICATIONS:

Navigation must be intuitive and optimised for handheld devices.

Given that more than half of web traffic is directed via handheld devices, there is a need for content to be mobile and tablet-optimised with simple, intuitive navigation. Resources need to be easy-to-follow, simple and in plain English.

Design will be simple with a clean aesthetic.

Content is most digestible when it is offered on a website that has a clean look and feel.

Two examples of this from our review:

Ahead For Business:

aheadforbusiness.org.au

Mix of candid portraits—small business owners in their working environments, with colourful graphics. It feels fresh and unisex, and has easy navigation.

Business Victoria:

business.vic.gov.au

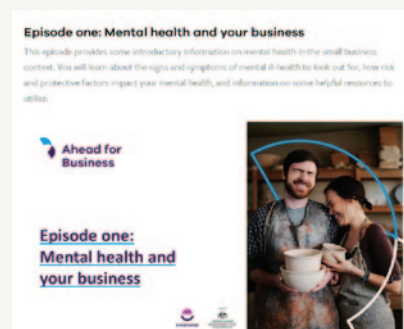
Well shot portraits and cartoon-style graphics. Adds visual personality to energise material and draw a reader in.



Multiple modes of delivery will enable users to select their preferred format.

SBOs need quick, bite-sized information that is accessible, meaningful and useful. Text-heavy content is fatiguing for users, particularly when time-poor and accessing content via a handheld device.

- Multiple forms of content are needed to aid engagement, including infographics, video, audio and interactive components.
- Webinars or podcasts backed with takeaway booklets can provide useful information in different forms to offer the user different access points to suit their needs.
- An example of this is Ahead for Business, which has a webinar series with three 15-20 min episodes backed with a takeaway booklet: aheadforbusiness.org.au/resources/wellbeing-webinar-series



Interactivity may help drive engagement.

Providing multiple modes of delivery and increasing interactivity where possible will help to drive engagement with the content. Some examples from the landscape analysis are included below:

- **Presenting interactive content** with a mix of video and slides: www.peopleatwork.gov.au/learningmodules/story.html
- **Keeping interactivity simple**—for example, this is a simple multiple choice questionnaires to self-diagnose: www.headsup.org.au/your-mental-health/mental-health-and-small-business/looking-after-yourself-as-a-small-business-owner
- **Headspace interactive tools**—roleplay scenario without actors: headspace.org.au/online-and-phone-support/interactive-tools/activities/how-to-impress-in-a-job-interview

51% of website traffic in Australia originates from a handheld device

INCREASE UPTAKE THROUGH STRATEGIC DESIGN

FINDINGS:

Good content is underutilised due to design barriers.

The digital landscape analysis revealed that whilst there was useful content available for SBOs, access was limited by design barriers.

For example, solutions were not provided in a quick and easy-to-access format, including poor navigation, text-heavy content and long videos/recordings.

Furthermore, exploration of many of the websites covered in this analysis revealed a rabbit warren of links to cover off every eventuality, with the user experience suffering as a result.

Access is limited by time.

Good content may also be underutilised due to barriers to the user's support seeking behaviour. Research indicates that one of the main barriers for SBOs seeking support is the cost (54%), lack of time (46%) and service availability in business hours (23%)³.

This research was reflected in consultation with industry, where SBOs highlighted workload and resulting time pressure as a significant barrier to proactively supporting new and expectant parents.

SBOs may not access the resources that are available to them because they are too difficult or too time-consuming to locate and navigate and this may result in SBOs not acting until situations become urgent.

"Realistically by the time you like get up at 7am and then you get home at 9pm, there's not a huge amount of time to do extra stuff."

"It's just so busy, no one has any time for anything ... I don't know how a pharmacy owner could support or would support a young mother."

"Well, if the staff leave, then I have to cover their workload until I can find a replacement. And then finding a replacement takes time. And training them up or getting them on board takes time. And I don't have time of deal with that."

IMPLICATIONS:

Less is more.

SBOs told us that they often visit websites to solve a specific problem, and they require a quick solution, rather than lengthy and detailed implementation plans. Brevity in the content delivery is key, and resources should include clear, practical and actionable tips.

For optional deeper dives on particular subject, we will link to other existing resources that provide related information, supporting the user to navigate the complex information landscape.

Barriers to access must be minimal.

Logins and registrations can present access barriers for users due to forgotten login details, time taken to register, as well as fear of spam or unwanted content. This reduces motivation to sign up.

The benefit of capturing user data via logins therefore needs to be weighed against the need for quick engagement with resources. This will be a key consideration in the digital briefing process, in consultation with our UX provider.

We must leverage circles of influence to capture SBOs where they are already searching.

SBOs tend to access their information via industry associations, peak bodies or CPD pages, as well as generic search engines (e.g. Google).

By including links to our resources on these websites, we will likely increase awareness and timely access. A targeted marketing campaign will also support users to locate our resources when they need it most.



NEXT STEPS

Taking forward the conclusions from our consultation and digital analysis, we will conduct a 'pulse check' across small businesses more generally to establish a baseline of how new and expectant parents in small businesses are coping from a mental health perspective.

Website development and content production will also commence, with our pilot launch due in February 2023.



To register for updates, or to take part in our pilot, please sign up [here](https://www.transitioningwell.com.au/parents-in-small-business/):

www.transitioningwell.com.au/parents-in-small-business/

The Australian Perinatal Workplace Wellbeing Program is being delivered in partnership with [Centre of Perinatal Excellence \(COPE\)](#) and [Pracademia](#).



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