weprotect
Global Alliance

Health and wellbeing of frontline responders

1. Executive summary

Purpose

WeProtect Global Alliance is committed to ending child sexual abuse and exploitation online. There are currently thousands of digital frontline responders countering child sexual abuse on a day-to-day basis – removing horrific images, investigating cases, and supporting victims. 'Digital frontline responders' in this report refers to the professionals who respond to the sexual abuse and exploitation of children online, including child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and the grooming of children for sexual purposes. They include content moderators, hotline analysts, social workers and law enforcement. There is a clear 'duty of care' for employers to recognise the trauma these professionals may experience as a result of their daily work and ensure their needs are met. The purpose of this research project is to contribute to the growing body of empirical evidence exploring the health and wellbeing of digital frontline responders, and to make recommendations to employers that is rooted in their lived experiences and expertise.
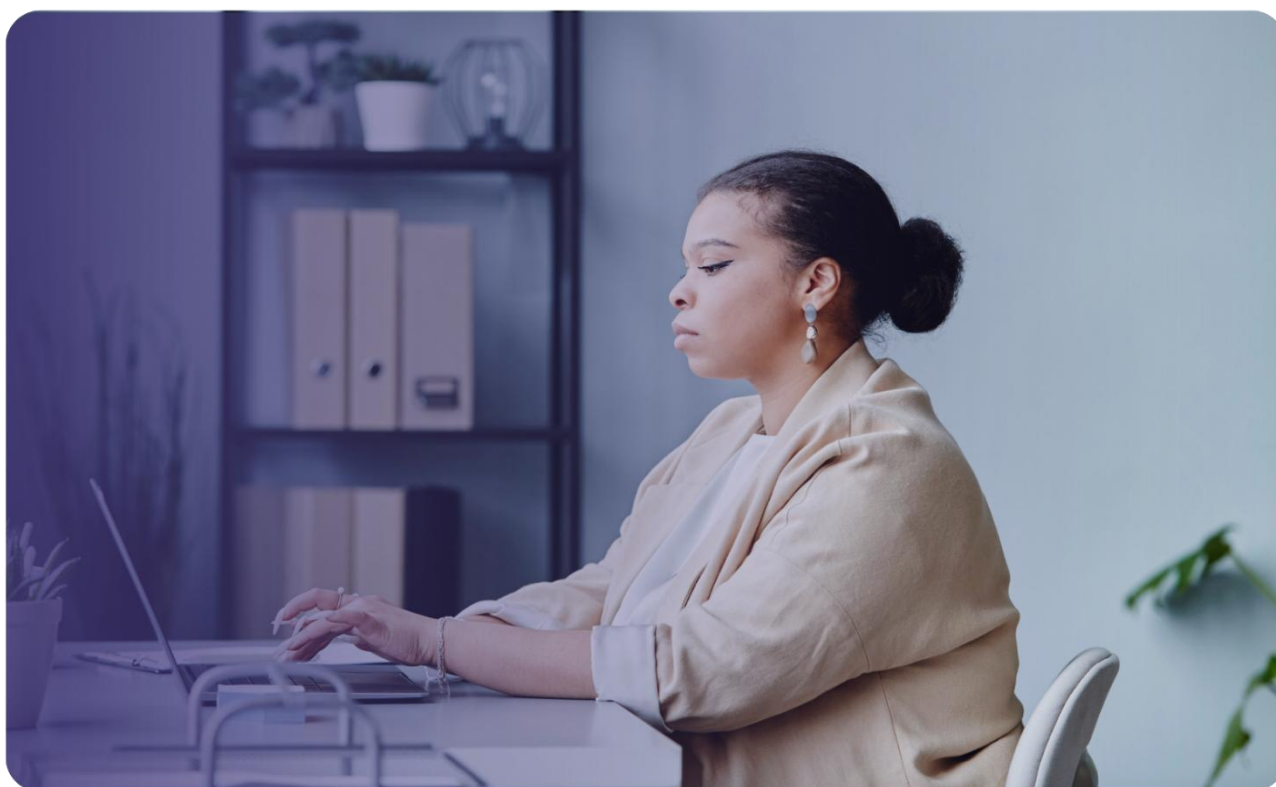
Summary of findings

Digital frontline responders work in a rapidly changing environment and in a world that generally does not understand their role. While many find their jobs deeply fulfilling, the nature of their work may take a toll on their health and wellbeing. Participants of this research had learned and developed coping strategies, and employers implemented support to varying degrees throughout their work cycle. Significant measures identified by participants in this study and other research that are important to highlight include: screening during hiring, tailored training, teaching wellbeing strategies, provision of counselling, regular breaks during the day, providing spaces and facilities to unwind, flexible work patterns, and the use of technological tools to manage workloads[1].

However, employers often implemented only a few of these measures, and there are notable frustrations stemming from unmet needs within the field. Few participants' employers offered any support post-employment and a number of participants did not receive adequate training before or support during their employment. Many responders expressed dissatisfaction with a lack of recognition, poor understanding of their roles, and feeling unheard by their organisations. They wanted support and work policies to be developed with them and tailored to their particular needs. Opportunities to engage in varied tasks, network with other professionals and advance their skills and careers were highly valued by participants. These initiatives not only enhance job satisfaction but also ensure that responders remain effective and committed to their critical work. Creating an environment where responders feel supported, valued and empowered is vital for the health and wellbeing of this essential workforce.

Recommendations for employers:

- When recruiting for digital frontline responder posts, prior employment in the area should be taken into consideration for assessing burnout and for prioritising mental health monitoring, as length of service in this area heightens the likelihood of trauma.

- Health and wellbeing programmes should support workers after they leave their current post, even if they leave the organisation.

- Wellbeing programmes for digital frontline responders should include mechanisms to help individuals assess their own needs for counselling, ensuring they do not ignore mental illness symptoms, and have access to support as and when they need it. Many digital frontline responders highly value time away from working directly with potentially traumatic content whether that be via paid leave or by undertaking other tasks. Creating a varied workload with frequent downtime is best practice for these workers.

- Digital frontline responders are the essential safety workers of the Internet and organisations should shine a light on the important work they do, communicating organisational pride in their successes to combat some digital frontline responders' feelings of being part of an isolated and often hidden workforce.

- Develop performance metrics recognising a specialised skillset for this cohort of workers no matter what type of organisation they work for, as they are neither customer service professionals, nor software engineers, nor rank and file officers.

- Work with other organisations to create systems to share feedback and validate the work being done as a community to combat online child sexual abuse and exploitation. This would help to raise levels of job satisfaction that could combat high levels of turnover.

- Proactively helping digital frontline responders develop international networks to promote professional best practices and share learnings, tools and expertise.

- Technology tools to support digital frontline responders' health and wellbeing should be specifically developed for them and should support their reporting tasks, as well as their identification tasks.

Recommended resources

Resource title and link	Publisher
Framework for the employment of content moderators: The First Line of Defence in Online Child Protection: A Model Framework for Employers of Content Moderators - International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children	International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (ICMEC)
Research regarding police wellbeing: (PDF) International health and wellness of online child sexual exploitation police personnel: individual, management, and organisational realms of responsibility	Frontiers in Psychology
Research regarding content moderator wellbeing: Supporting digital key workers: Addressing the challenges faced by content moderators during and after the COVID-19 pandemic : Middlesex University Research Repository	Middlesex University Research Repository

2. Introduction

In many areas of life, we have frontline services in place to ensure the wellbeing and safety of others, such as healthcare workers or police officers. Often these workers face high levels of risk and exposure to sensitive and graphic material. 'Digital frontline responders' in this report are the Internet essential safety workers that respond to child sexual abuse content posted online that is reported by others or flagged by tools. The nature of their work could include content moderation on online platforms, analysing content for hotlines, providing psychosocial support to victim-survivors, and investigating suspected cases of child sexual abuse and exploitation online, among other things.

In recent years, there has been increasing recognition of the toll that cumulative exposure to trauma can take on individuals working in professions that respond to online child sexual abuse and exploitation. This is skilled work, requiring an understanding of context. It is challenging work that is both disturbing and repetitive. It is work that is largely ignored by society but that may take a toll on the mental health of its workforce. Digital frontline responders often suffer mental health problems such as trouble sleeping, panic attacks and depression. Despite the development of artificial intelligence (AI) tooling to support this work, humans will continue to play a pivotal role because of the nuanced understanding required of culture and contexts for certain decisions, and the ability to provide empathetic support tailored to the unique needs of each individual.

This report is based on primary research to assess the work-related risk and protective factors available to digital frontline responders. The report focuses on the support provided to digital frontline responders throughout their career in this area. The goal is to use this research to recommend ways to enhance work practices that can boost the health and wellbeing of digital frontline responders while also improving employee retention.

It is encouraging that the study found that digital frontline responders are proud of the work they do and often derive strong job satisfaction from their role. Many would like to stay in the area and be part of an international professional community. However, their health and wellbeing is negatively impacted by their work. The research discovered that individual wellbeing requirements are not being met and that many employers do not understand or publicly acknowledge the work they do.

While many digital frontline responders feel trapped in the role, they believe that organisations can make a positive difference by making a few practical changes. Firstly, the support offered to employees needs to be more flexible, listening to digital frontline responders and adapting to their individual requirements. Secondly, as a community, there is a requirement to consider ways for digital frontline responders to better communicate with each other across organisations to begin to establish a professional network within the global child protection ecosystem.

3. Methodology

Between August and October 2024, WeProtect Global Alliance conducted 26 in-depth qualitative interviews with professionals working to combat online child sexual abuse and exploitation. Participants included content moderators, hotline and helpline analysts, social workers and case workers, and law enforcement officials from 13 different countries. Participants were recruited through newsletters, membership communications and targeted email outreach. To qualify for participation, interviewees were required to have at least two years of experience in responding to online child sexual abuse and exploitation. Additionally, all participants had access to counselling services or referrals to support organisations through their current roles.

Breakdown of participants

Gender

Gender	Number
Female	14
Male	12

Country

Region	Number of Countries	Number of Participants
Africa	3	4
Asia	2	3
Europe	4	9
North America	1	2
South America	1	4
Oceania (Australia and New Zealand)	2	4

Role

Role	Number	Sector/ Details
Content Moderator	4	Private Companies
Content Analyst	2	NGOs
Content Analyst & Researcher	2	1 NGO & 1 Private company
Hotline Analyst	9	NGOs
Image Assessor	1	NGO
Case or Social Worker/ Safeguarding lead	3	2 governments & 1 NGO
Law Enforcement	5	Includes 1 civilian investigator

The research underwent a rigorous ethical process to ensure the highest standards of integrity and participant protection. All participants were provided with detailed information about the research project and signed a consent form. They were informed that they could ask questions by email or set up a meeting with the researchers before the interview, and that they could withdraw from the research at any time before it was published. The interview questions and plan (see Appendix 1) were developed by the WeProtect Global Alliance research team and reviewed by external colleagues from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police who have extensive experience in researching the current and former employees who work(ed) in online child sexual exploitation units. These questions served as a flexible guide, allowing the interviews to adopt a conversational approach. This format provided participants with the opportunity to share their experiences and perspectives openly. There were always two researchers from WeProtect Global Alliance present at the interviews, one in the background writing notes and the other leading the interview.

Acknowledging the sensitive nature of the subject matter, interviewers avoided intrusive questions and emphasised that participants had full control over their involvement. Participants were informed that they could take breaks at any time during the interview, refrain from answering questions, or leave the interview at any time. Additionally, in recognition of the emotional challenges that could arise, a session with a psychologist was available for those who could not access adequate mental health support.

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The data was stored securely, only the WeProtect Global Alliance researchers had access to it, and was anonymised when presented outside the organisation. Thematic analysis was conducted by two researchers. After the data was transcribed, answers to each question were coded using an Excel spreadsheet in order to process and interpret the data. The researchers compared codes and interpretations to develop themes. The themes processed followed the structure of the interview schema, enabling comparison and analysis of answers to form the report's findings and recommendations.

Copies of the draft report were shared with participants who agreed to be contacted (all but one) to ensure they could not be identified in the report and that their input was not misrepresented. The draft report was shared with experts in the field, Professor Elena Martellozzo, and the research team at the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) led by Dr Roberta Sinclair for them to review and share insights into how the findings related to the broader literature.

4. Existing literature context

Our research built on existing literature that helped inform our interviews with these professionals. Several studies that researched the impact of CSAM on law enforcement personnel have helped shape our interviews. For example, Redmond, Conway, Bailey, Lee and Lundrigan in 2023[2] found that while respondents were aware of work-based support, they indicated that they never or almost never used them with the barriers to accessing them relating to a perception of a critical or judgemental workplace culture. This in turn indicated a lack of trust in their organisations. A study by Mitchell, Gewirtz-Meydan, Finkelhor, O'Brien and Jones in 2023 found that strategies that promoted partnership and collaboration (e.g., talking with other investigators or someone about what they were viewing) appeared to be particularly beneficial for mental health.[3] Another paper by Mitchell, Gewirtz-Meydan, O'Brien and Finkelhor the previous year (2022) suggested that it was important to consider how a combination of factors, including not only exposure to the content but also the volume of work contributed to stress and trauma.[4] Simonovska, Sinclair and Duval in their 2023 paper noted that the utility and design of health and wellness policies, the potential of evidence-based screening tools in the recruitment phase, the benefits of workplace design and

culture in support of health and wellness and an in-depth examination of manager's perspective all merit further research.[5]

Until recently there were very few studies researching online content moderators (CMs) and the impact monitoring CSAM has on them. However, our research has been influenced by one of the first large scale surveys investigating the health and wellbeing of content moderators by Spence, Bifulco, Bradbury, Martellozzo and DeMarco in 2023[6]. Just under half of those surveyed in this study scored over 13 on the Core-10 mental health monitoring measure[7], which is associated with clinical depression. As Bleakley, Martellozzo, Spence and DeMarco comment, "ensuring the CMs are adequately equipped to perform their duties in a way that prioritises their own personal wellbeing remains an area requiring further research, and greater intervention on an industry level."[8] This finding is also reached in work by Roberts, Wood and Eadon in 2023[9] which explained the challenging skillset required for the work, including a certain level of technical expertise, strong analytical skills in applying policy and using evidence for decision-making, emotional and mental skills like empathy and the ability to cope with frequent and prolonged exposure to traumatic content. This study concluded that, "there is a gap to be filled in internal organisation and public understanding of content moderation and its role in the social media ecosystem, as well as the impact it has on those who undertake it."

Informed by prior studies such as these, our research contributes to a greater understanding of the health and wellbeing of digital frontline responders working in different roles in the global child protection community.

5. The job's challenges to health and wellbeing

> ❝ The reason I do this interview – I want the industry and everyone to understand the struggle of this role. I want us to feel valued, not toxic. People will be damaged by this job so need to be listened to. Shouldn't need to have to fight for care. We need more acknowledgement, value, understanding, care." ❞
>
> North American content analyst

The online content management and monitoring role has really only come into being over the past 20 years, and it began as a more traditional voluntary moderation role managing online communities interacting in chat rooms. It has evolved with the mass-market social media platforms to become an important frontline responder capability, tasked with identifying, reporting and removing CSAM, along with other types of illegal content. This line of defence against the growing onslaught of CSAM is a role shared by all the participants in this study even though they are employed by different types of organisations to perform discrete tasks – they contribute to an interconnected ecosystem of online child protection. Some are, *"controlling the content being uploaded into spaces where children could be present by eliminating inappropriate content and limiting bad actors from accessing the platform."* Others have a remit to, *"remove CSAM from the Internet, [to] look proactively for content, not just reported content."* Still others are identifying and supporting victims of CSAM, while a few in this study are tasked with finding and bringing to justice the perpetrators of this illegal content.

Interviewees in this study typically spend between two to six hours a day looking at CSAM. Many are looking at hundreds to thousands of images, videos and pieces of text daily. Most do not spend more than three or four consecutive days analysing CSAM because the weekly number of hours they are permitted to do this work is capped at 18 – 24 hours. The rest of their time is spent doing administration, training others,

writing reports and contributing to research. However, in this study, private sector content moderators and law enforcement personnel were found to have heavier workloads – the former because their metrics were shaped by quota-based customer service working practices, and the latter because cases come in and need to be dealt with for as long as it takes to solve them.

The majority of participants in this research said that the work had impacted them. *"I'm very wary. My faith in humanity has dropped. I look at the world differently."* (Oceanian victim identification specialist). Many reported symptoms associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)[10] such as: intrusion (e.g. flashbacks, nightmares), avoidance (e.g. avoidance of trauma-related thoughts or feelings and reminders), alterations in cognition and mood (e.g. overly negative thoughts and assumptions about oneself or the world, negative affect), and hyperarousal symptoms (e.g. irritability and aggression, difficulty sleeping).

As other studies have shown[11], digital frontline responders often feel a sense of pride and value from their work. In our research some participants felt that their work had impacted them positively, rather than negatively. In particular, digital frontline responders who had taken early retirement from a prior career and joined this workforce later in life felt it gave them a renewed purpose: *"I have great job satisfaction – at the click of a mouse I can do real good and irritate nasty people…. The content is horrific, but I know what I am doing is a joy."* (European NGO analyst).

This study reinforced other studies[12] in finding that one of the key factors contributing to a strong sense of job satisfaction was getting direct feedback on the outcome of the work. This was true across all the different types of roles interviewed: *"Usually (in terms of wellbeing) it is 'death by a thousand cuts.' If I never saw an end result/positive outcomes, I would not stay. Seeing positive results is a coping mechanism."* (Oceania law enforcement officer). We found that this ability to see the outcome of work is much more likely if the digital frontline responder works for a law enforcement agency than if they work for other types of organisations in the child protection ecosystem.

One problem impacting the wellbeing of digital frontline responders is frustration that the number of cases of CSAM is rising while platforms are slow to remove flagged content. *"I only feel upset or frustrated when more cases come out to a certain victim (resharing of images, more content of same victim) and in this case it feels like I have failed. I feel unable to stop the cases from spreading."* (Asian content moderator).

As others have noted[13], another challenge of the work is not being able to discuss it with friends and family. *"It is hard to separate private life from work, but you cannot talk about it outside the team in case you implicate someone. I do feel really alone with all of this because I can't explain to people at home why I am so cross at times."* (Hotline analyst for a European NGO). This means that the digital frontline responder's team of colleagues play a very important part in supporting health and wellbeing: *"The hotline room is one of the safe spaces in my life."* (Analyst for a European nonprofit).

The majority of participants in our study work in an office to which they commute and which they find pleasant to be in, several referring to their workspace as a "happy space", a "safe bubble," and a "home". They may feel isolated in their work environment but at least they are with others that understand the work and its challenges: *"We are like hermits, but we love our office, it is our safe bubble."* (South American content analyst).

Office camaraderie is frequently seen as an essential component of the frontline digital responder's wellbeing, and recognising this, many workplaces have a policy that does not allow the viewing of CSAM content alone. *"I could use more quiet but I also need comradery. I can work by myself, but it is usually best to work with more than one operative."* (Law enforcement in Oceania).

Organisations seem to be trying to do more work with the same or less people. This burden is felt across different digital frontline responder roles. For example, with outsourced contracts: "*The challenge is constant job insecurity combined with the heavy responsibility of the job."* (South American content moderator). Or in the context of government organisations that are trying to keep pace with child protection requirements: *"I don't take a vacation. There is always more work to do. As much as employers say they care, actions don't say so. My colleague took his life because of this work."* (Law enforcement in North America).

One finding concerning wellbeing identified via the research is that many people working in this area are taking a *personalised* sense of responsibility for outcomes as the amount of CSAM increases. The organisations they work for are to a greater or lesser extent supporting them but the relentless growth of CSAM is impacting them. Part of the problem is that digital frontline responders hear the news stories we all hear about the growing levels of harm to children committed using online platforms, and they are feeling pressure to work harder. In return they get little societal credit for the work they do because they feel that people do not understand the role they play, a perception that is explained in Mary L. Gray's research into how Silicon Valley is building a new global underclass[14]. *"As a team we are pretty resilient, and we know our job is worthwhile and there is job satisfaction when a case is solved. But it is 'ghost work.'"* (Content analyst in South America).
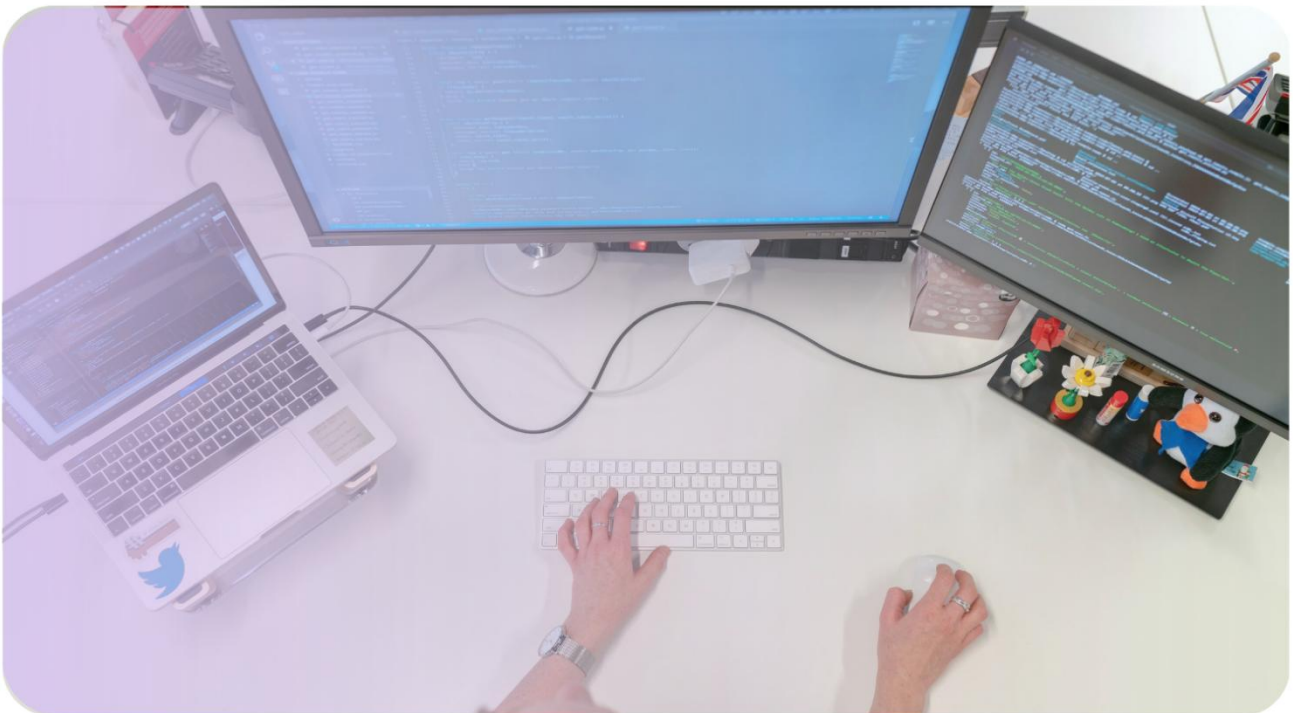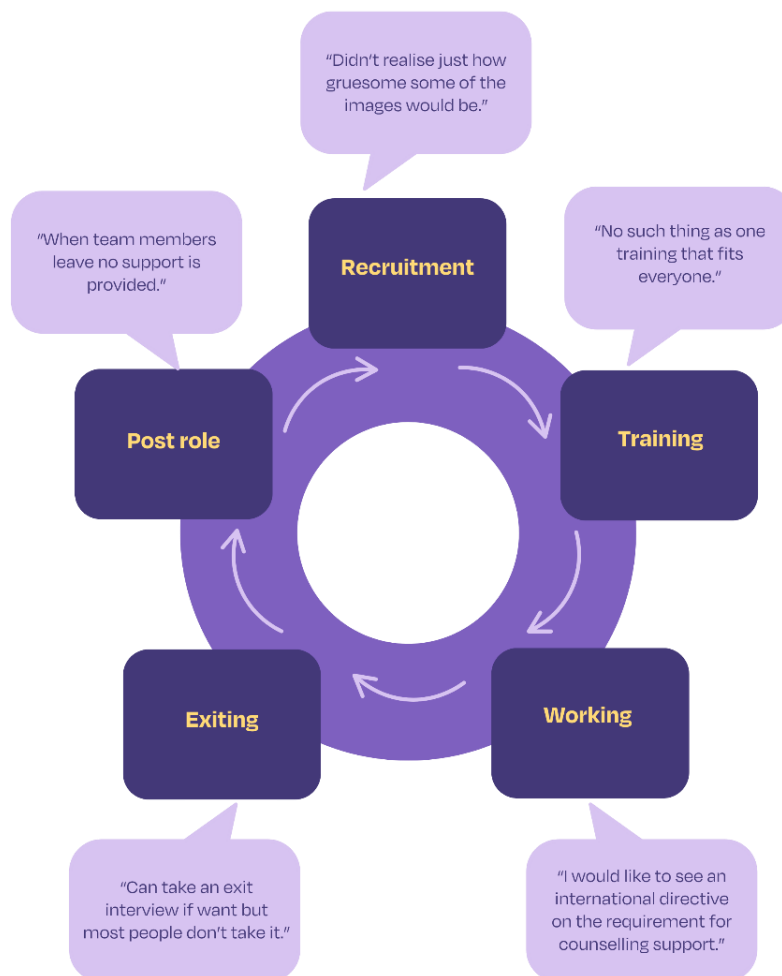
6. Support available throughout the digital frontline responder lifecycle

In general, this research found digital frontline responders that were best supported throughout all aspects of the job lifecycle worked for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and nonprofits. Those working in other parts of the child protection ecosystem such as government agencies, law enforcement and content moderators were more likely to say that support at each stage of the job lifecycle could be improved. Support services provided in the working environment are assessed in more detail in Section 8 of this report. This study also suggests that employers need to pay more attention to the employee exit (where there should be a responsibility to explain that PTSD often occurs after the job ends) and with post-role support. Ironically, those with prior experience working as a digital frontline responder are frequently less likely to be screened for PTSD before taking a new role.

One of the themes the research sought to explore was how health and wellbeing was supported throughout the job lifecycle of digital frontline responders. The interviews were structured to ask participants about how they were supported at each stage of the employee lifecycle from recruitment, through training, working, exiting and (potentially) moving onto another role as a digital frontline responder.

The digital frontline responder job lifecycle

"Didn't realise just how gruesome some of the images would be."

"When team members leave no support is provided."

"No such thing as one training that fits everyone."

Recruitment

Post role

Training

Exiting

Working

"Can take an exit interview if want but most people don't take it."

"I would like to see an international directive on the requirement for counselling support."

Recruitment and screening

Most participants had undertaken police checks and those working for NGOs had also completed a psychological assessment before working with CSAM. This was not standard practice for everyone and, echoing prior findings[15] those in law enforcement were not screened again if they had prior experience working with CSAM. Most participants were concerned about the nature of the work if this was their first role working with CSAM, but not all felt able to express these concerns at the interview.

Training

Training for the interviewees in this study ranged from six weeks to three months involving structured programmes covering technology, CSAM classification and mentoring/job shadowing before working alone. Several interviewees mentioned that they had used external training courses provided by INHOPE and by Interpol. Most participants had been trained in using tooling and how to classify content, and those working for NGOs and law enforcement had usually been psychologically prepared for the work by undertaking graduated exposure training. This type of training is rated highly by those that have undertaken it especially if it moves at a pace dictated by the trainee. Several participants mentioned a preference for face-to-face one-on-one training rather than online courses. Suggestions for improvements to training included: introducing more testing about what has been learned to build confidence; training in how to understand stress indicators in yourself and others in the team; and training on identification of different parts of the body seen in CSAM.

Working

All interviewees in this research have some access to emotional support services because they were not eligible to participate in this study without it. Interviewees that are happy with what is offered by their organisations have regular mandatory face-to-face sessions with counsellors where they can discuss both work and personal issues. One issue raised by many interviewees was how many other professionals working in the child protection ecosystem do not have access to this support with admin workers, engineers and legal specialists all mentioned. As one interviewee put it: ***"Psychological support is only possible if it is considered from the start. It needs to be financed and resourced from the start."*** (Content analyst in South America).

Exit and post-role

Those who were content and confident about exiting the role and having access to ongoing support tended to work for NGOs and nonprofits in Europe. Digital frontline responders interviewed in this study working for private companies, government agencies or law enforcement had not been offered post-role support once they had left a position working in this area. This is an important finding as other studies have indicated that mental health problems often become more evident after employees leave post.[16] Previous exposure to CSAM can also often be an indicator of increased likelihood of PTSD or burnout.[17]

Can't technology help?

There are recent advances in technology aimed at reducing the burden on digital frontline responders, such as the utilisation of artificial intelligence (AI) for content moderation and in law enforcement investigations, but opinion is divided as to whether this will ultimately eliminate the need for human frontline responders to see CSAM. A recent BBC Radio 4 documentary interviewed Dave Wilner who was Head of Trust and Safety at OpenAI until 2023 and who is now involved in developing new tools and approaches to enable AI to reduce the number of humans needed for the identification and removal of CSAM. For example, the Atlas of AI is a project involving lots of humans labelling content so that ChatGPT can classify material without humans in the loop. Indeed, some of the people in our research were working on this project. According to Wilner the relentlessness and scale of the work is the problem. He is confident that we can get to a place where language models can do this classification but said that humans will be needed as part of the process for some time yet. Some humans (digital frontline responders) may always be required because it is difficult to introduce nuance to a machine (and it should be noted that this work is only just beginning for the English Language, with work in other languages practically non-existent yet).

7. Frontline responders coping strategies

The majority of interviewees in our research had received advice on coping strategies from their organisations. This response from a participant was typical, *"we were given resiliency tools – breathing, get up, walk around, a wellness space." (*North American content analyst). However, there was a range of opinions about the advice given. As other studies have shown[18], while everyone accepted that breaks were sensible, not everyone felt able to take them because of the pressure of the workload.

One result that this study found was that there was often felt to be a conflict between organisational advice and the autonomy of the digital frontline responder to be in control of their health and wellbeing. For example: *"My organisation talks about mental health a lot but doesn't listen so well to individual needs. For example, we are told we must take time off in lieu within the month for our wellbeing, but I would prefer to bank it for when I need it. The organisation does not respond to individual requirements."* (Hotline analyst in Europe).

Many interviewees pointed to this tension between the stated organisational aims to provide health and wellbeing support and the employee's actual personal requirements:
"I think they've invested a lot in this area. But I sometimes think they miss the basics. Quite a lot. They can put external things in like, oh, we're putting more psych reviews for you or we're making these mandatory things to do.. You don't view at this time and you don't view at that time and you've got to have this many breaks and all these kind of things. But then on a day-to-day basis, sometimes how you're managed isn't that great... I personally think there's a lot of tokenism goes on, to be honest with you".
(Law enforcement professional in Oceania).

The majority of our interviewees said they could take regular breaks from viewing CSAM, with many able to go outside for a walk. Physical exercise is a popular coping mechanism as well as meditation and yoga. Several interviewees mentioned the importance of hobbies such as model building, drumming, collecting and selling books – activities that take the mind into a state of flow and away from intrusive thoughts about

work. This echoes results found by Spence, Harrison, Bradbury, Bleakley, Martelloz and DeMarco (2023) into content moderators' ways to regulate their emotions.[19]

However, the best coping mechanism expressed by digital frontline responders in different roles was the development of a 'work family'. This operates on two levels:

- On one level it is an informal collegiate support system that provides the feeling that these team members understand the pressures and have each other's backs. It is an organic group dynamic that, for example, will try to shield those returning from maternity leave from dealing with horrific images involving babies: *"Need to develop a work family. Can't share at home so need to be able to share with team."* (Law enforcement professional in Oceania).

- At another level, it can be encouraged and fostered by organisations, as this contribution made clear: *"We have an all staff meeting every two weeks that acknowledges our life outside work, that we are individuals that exist beyond work. This is a drumbeat from the CEO down."* (Hotline analyst for a European nonprofit).

The positive impact of the creation of a supportive work environment has been noted in other studies such as that by Gewirtz-Meydan, Mitchell and O'Brien (2023) who found that this culture among law enforcement may also, however, hamper individuals from asking for external counselling[20].

Indeed, one theme about coping strategies that emerged from this study unprompted (in other words interviewees were not directly asked questions on the topic) was that many felt from their experience of working with law enforcement agencies in this area that those in law enforcement are not well supported and are not coping well.

For example:
"Law enforcement colleagues who are employed by the government do not take the mental health of their employees seriously enough or provide as much support. Law enforcement need to receive more education on mental health." (Hotline analyst for a non-profit in Africa).

8. Responder experiences of formal support services provided by employers

Many responders, particularly those employed by NGOs, reported satisfaction with the formal mental health services offered by their organisations. These services typically included access to a qualified counsellor or psychologist. The methods of providing these services varied: most were delivered by external professionals, some organisations facilitated group support sessions, and the majority provided individual counselling. Many organisations mandated counselling sessions, and some allowed employees to access support on demand. Additionally, some responders noted receiving ad hoc mental health services, reflecting the variability in resources available to different employers. For most participants, counselling served as an essential outlet to process their emotions and manage the challenges of their demanding roles. A recurring theme among positive experiences was the consistency and quality of relationships with counsellors. One responder shared: **"Counselling support is really helpful, and I have built a positive relationship with the same counsellor. I talk about everything outside of work. They also ask how work is going. There are no barriers to accessing support"** (Hotline analyst for an NGO in Europe).

Several interviewees discussed the importance of being able to share with counsellors both personal and professional matters without feeling judged or restricted. Having accessible, barrier-free services with counsellors who understand their work was highlighted by several participants. An experience that illustrates the importance of this was given by a participant who described a counsellor who did not understand their work. The frontline responder spent their counselling session explaining their role and then responding to the counsellor's emotional response.

Despite the positive feedback, there was a sense among some responders that counselling services were implemented more as a procedural requirement for the organisation than as a genuine effort to support employees. One responder remarked, **"We get a once-a-year psychological assessment that signals whether you are well enough to continue working in this area. This is more for the organisation's benefit than mine"** (Hotline analyst for an NGO in Europe). Such an approach risks alienating responders, making them less likely to engage with these services or perceive them as beneficial.

Another recurring issue was the inconsistency of counselling support. While some organisations provided regular sessions, these were not always sufficient to meet the needs of responders. One interviewee described their experience as follows, **"We have brief face-to-face meetings with a psychologist for counselling in another place. This is mandatory once a month. I need them more frequently than that sometimes, so I talk with my colleagues. I find this very helpful."** (Hotline analyst for an NGO in South America). This statement underscores the gap between the frequency of formal counselling sessions and the actual needs of responders. It also points to the value of peer support as an informal but critical resource when organisational systems fall short.

Some responders expressed hesitation or distrust in using organisational counselling services. Concerns about confidentiality, potential repercussions, and cultural stigma associated with seeking help were prevalent. One responder recounted, **"I think that people working for this brand did not feel safe accessing support services and worried that pay would be taken from their salary if they attended counselling."** (Content moderator in South America).

Such fears not only deter individuals from seeking help but also highlight systemic issues that need addressing to build trust. Organisations must ensure that their support services are perceived as safe, confidential, and free from any punitive consequences. For some responders in law enforcement, accessing support services was complicated by internalised stigma and the belief that seeking help signified weakness.

The experiences of responders with organisational support services reveal a spectrum of perspectives, ranging from experiencing much needed assistance to significant frustration. While counselling services have proven beneficial for many, inconsistencies in accessibility, perceptions of organisational motives, and cultural barriers undermine their effectiveness. By prioritising trust, accessibility, and responsiveness to individual needs, organisations can create a more supportive environment that empowers responders to seek and benefit from the help they need.

9. How organisational structure impacts responder health and wellbeing

In addition to formal mental health support, organisational culture, structure, systems and environment plays a critical role in shaping the health and wellbeing of responders working in high-pressure roles.

Feeling valued by the organisation

Around half of the participants reported feeling valued by their organisations. For these individuals, the sense of recognition extended beyond their technical abilities to their intrinsic worth as individuals. One responder expressed this sentiment, **"I feel valued for myself as a person, not just for my skillset"** (Hotline analyst for an NGO in Europe).

However, others described their praise as superficial or insincere, reflecting a disconnect between responders and senior management. A participant remarked that they receive, **"great job emails, but it seems like cut and paste"** (Law enforcement in Oceania). Some interviewees seemed to feel conflicted about whether they felt valued by their organisations. They seemed to feel that the overall contribution the team made was important but were often unclear about whether they were genuinely valued as individual contributors.

The perceived lack of understanding from senior management about the realities of frontline work exacerbates these feelings. One responder commented, **"If I was in charge, I'd be more empathetic towards our team and hire a specialist in HR to improve levels of wellbeing, because 14 hours a week watching CSAM is too much. Our mental health is not OK. It's not a lack of interest; they just don't understand"** (Hotline analyst for an NGO in South America).

Law enforcement participants, in particular, highlighted a lack of appreciation for their specialised skills. One officer shared, **"Even though we're highly skilled and trained, we are still put on van duty or football duty. Sometimes after an exhausting week, I'm put on football duty on a Saturday. I'm not valued – I'm just a number"** (Law enforcement in Europe).

Individualised support

A number of participants described concern from their organisation as tokenistic, and not tailored to their needs. This sentiment is exemplified by one participant who noted, **"(There is) lots of talk from management on importance of team but very little action. Everything done is by the team. Everything is dragged out by the management, and they are not listening to the team. They are more interested in other areas. Other areas have a higher profile and [are] easier to present externally"** (Hotline analyst for an NGO in Europe). This can lead to workers feeling undervalued, frustrated and unheard. For needs to be appropriately and effectively met, employers need to understand the unique circumstances of their teams and respond accordingly.

A participant gave us an example of a policy that was put in place for frontline responders' wellbeing but was successfully challenged. It was described by a participant, **"When I first joined there was a policy that no one could stay in the job for more than three years because you are just looking at images and so there was no obvious career progression. Because I am not interested in career progression, they agreed to extend my contract but refused to do this for another colleague. We are now working on a new wellbeing policy that means analysts are not expected to watch CSAM for six hours a day, so that they can**

stay in the team beyond two or three years. This policy change is happening because of networking with analysts from other hotlines where this two-to-three year turnover policy was not in place" (Hotline analyst for an NGO in Europe). This example underscores the importance of organisations listening to their employees and adapting policies to meet their specific needs. Frontline responders understand their own circumstances and should be able to advocate for appropriate change. It is notable that the networking described was international, illustrating the empowering impact of global communities.

Outcome feedback

A recurring theme among participants was the lack of structured feedback mechanisms regarding the outcome of cases worked on. Many expressed frustration over feeling excluded from the larger investigative process and being left in the dark about the outcomes of their contributions. One participant shared, **"It is sometimes frustrating that law enforcement takes over and makes us feel like a tiny piece of the puzzle. There is no formal feedback loop, but occasionally an investigator will come back to us to let us know what happened."** (Hotline analyst for an NGO in Europe). Another echoed this sentiment, emphasising the absence of a system to track case outcomes, **"We do not receive feedback regarding specific cases, it would be good and encouraging to have a system to receive this information. Currently have to find out by myself."** (Content analyst for a private company in Asia). These accounts highlight a significant gap in the collaboration process. For frontline analysts, receiving feedback on the results of their work is motivating and enhances their wellbeing. Establishing formal feedback loops between analysts and law enforcement could foster stronger partnerships, and enhance job satisfaction.

Physical environment

Environmental factors that were identified as improving wellbeing included having a space with natural light, a pleasant environment, access to distractions such as puzzles or games, and a separate space for breaks such as a comfortable room or a garden. The camaraderie that a shared office encouraged was viewed as positive and significant. A participant highlighted the office's dual role as a workspace and a refuge, **"We are in an isolated office with lots of windows... We have made it our home and a safe space. We are like hermits, but we love our office; it is our safe bubble."** (Hotline analyst for an NGO in South America).

Two participants worked from home and two others had the option of completing administrative tasks at home. These participants appreciated the flexibility that home-working offered, while they cared for children or pursued educational qualifications. One home-working interviewee mentioned that having this flexibility has greatly improved the organisation's ability to recruit, especially for hiring part-time workers because having no commute time made short shifts more appealing.

Technology

The availability and quality of technology significantly influences responder wellbeing and efficiency. There is a notable disparity in the tools provided by different organisations. Some responders reported limited access to specialised technology. In contrast, other organisations benefit from custom-built tools developed in-house designed specifically for the digital frontline responder team. Some of the technologies found to be useful were blurring, filters, warnings, and AI based tools. However, there was not universal agreement on the effectiveness of these tools, and much is dependent on specific actions and preferences.

Many interviewees were using software that grey-scaled and blurred the images *after* they had been classified so that they did not have to view them again and this was generally felt to be helpful, as well as AI tooling that previews images and provides warning of how egregious the upcoming material is, so that responders can prepare themselves, eliminating the shock of surprise. Tools that categorised already seen content and detected repeat images were praised as helpful in reducing the workload.

The interviewees that were most content with their technology typically had in=house technology support, with some having an engineer embedded in the team to be able to quickly develop, adapt or suggest technology that could assist as identification or classification challenges arose. Several interviewees were very impressed with facial recognition software for identifying perpetrators but some felt it was less useful for victim classification because it cannot recognise the age of the victim.

Tools that help responders navigate the *reporting* of CSAM is an area rarely considered and yet could be very helpful in improving health and wellbeing. As one interviewee put it: **"I would like tooling with high accuracy that tells you who to contact for each website to get CSAM images pulled off. We send requests to have content removed but if they say it is not their responsibility we do not know if it is or not. This gives me the most frustration, more so than the images themselves. If images we have flagged are still there months later, this impacts my wellbeing the most."** (Content analyst with a European NGO). Once CSAM has been reported it was suggested that it would improve wellbeing if automatic progress updates could be provided showing frontline responders the status of the reported cases.

This research suggests two main findings regarding the role of technology for health and wellbeing:

- Firstly, tooling that is developed by working closely with frontline responders is more effective in supporting them. For example, the content grading tools that had been developed in-house by Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) and then shared with other organisations were very well regarded.
- Secondly, attention on technology to mitigate the harm of viewing horrific visual images, while important, has overshadowed the ability for technology to improve responders' ways of reporting cases and of monitoring the progress of those cases once reported. Yet as this research indicates, this is an area that is also impactful on feelings of wellbeing.

It is, of course, also worth pointing out that, globally, many frontline digital responders work in organisations that do not provide much in the way of technology to help them at all. As one interviewee put it: **"There is no specific technology to help me. We have the national standard platform for case management. So often we assess images on our own laptops and then destroy them because the platform is accessed on shared machines."** (Government officer in Africa).

10. The urgent requirement for career structure and professional community

The lack of a structured career path emerged as a critical issue, with far-reaching implications for staff retention, job satisfaction, and mental health. Many interviewees highlighted this issue, noting the absence of structured pathways that acknowledge the unique demands of their work. A participant encapsulated this sentiment: **"I was very lucky to progress quickly up the corporate ladder because projects came up, so I could progress. Others did not have the same opportunities. You could develop skills via academies and then when you earned qualifications, these would go into the talent bank for promotion. There was not a lot of structured career progression, and any post that came up was fiercely contested."** (Content moderator in South America).

This inconsistency in progression opportunities creates disparities and frustration among professionals who are otherwise committed to the field. The absence of clear pathways contributes not only to professional stagnation but also to emotional strain, as workers grapple with a lack of direction in an already taxing role. Another participant described their frustration, **"I feel stuck. Would not be earning what I earn if I wasn't in this role. Can't earn this amount of money and have a mortgage. I don't want to be here. I want to have children but can't while doing this work because at the moment, can't give my nieces a bath. I am paid a good base but the metrics of judging for bonuses is not fair – the same as other IT staff. No consideration for the specific emotional toll of the role"** (Content moderator in North America). These comments underscore the emotional toll of a profession where personal sacrifices (such as not feeling able to be in an environment where children are naked) are compounded by a lack of recognition and advancement opportunities.

For many younger professionals, the absence of a clear career trajectory is particularly disheartening. Individuals recruited for their degrees in law or psychology, for example, often struggle to see how their academic background can translate into professional growth.
"We provide good metrics and recognition for the organisation, but our careers are not developed internally. I am personally frustrated the most by having no direct contact with victims and so cannot apply my psychology training. We learnt the [CSAM] classifications and do the work, but I need to grow as a psychologist, and we are not doing psychologist tasks." (Hotline analyst in South America). These accounts illustrate a common tension: while responders are passionate about their work, the lack of a defined career path prevents them from fully realising their potential within the sector.

Frontline responders in law enforcement faced additional barriers to career progression. Many feel their specialised skills are undervalued or misunderstood by organisational leadership. **"The organisation is not interested in developing careers. Those in control don't understand the online space. I can't stay in this unit and develop a career. This is sad because so much of crime has moved online. My skill set takes years to master, and this knowledge and skills are being lost"** (Law enforcement professional in Oceania).

While many respondents expressed a desire for structured progression, some took a different view. Some participants were at the end of their career and were not looking to progress. Others worked part-time and/or flexible hours that they fit around other priorities such as childcare or studying. However, these exceptions do not diminish the urgency of addressing broader structural deficiencies for those who wish to build long-term careers in the field.

Developing professional networks and support systems can help mitigate feelings of isolation and stagnation. Regular conferences, mentorship programmes, and peer-to-peer learning opportunities can

enhance both career satisfaction and wellbeing. An interviewee stated, **"I recently went to a conference. Talking to people at conference, I felt very validated because heard about the importance of job"** (Content analyst in North America).

The urgent need for career structure and professional community in the digital frontline responder field cannot be overstated. Addressing these gaps will not only enhance health and wellbeing but also ensure the retention of skilled professionals dedicated to this critical work.
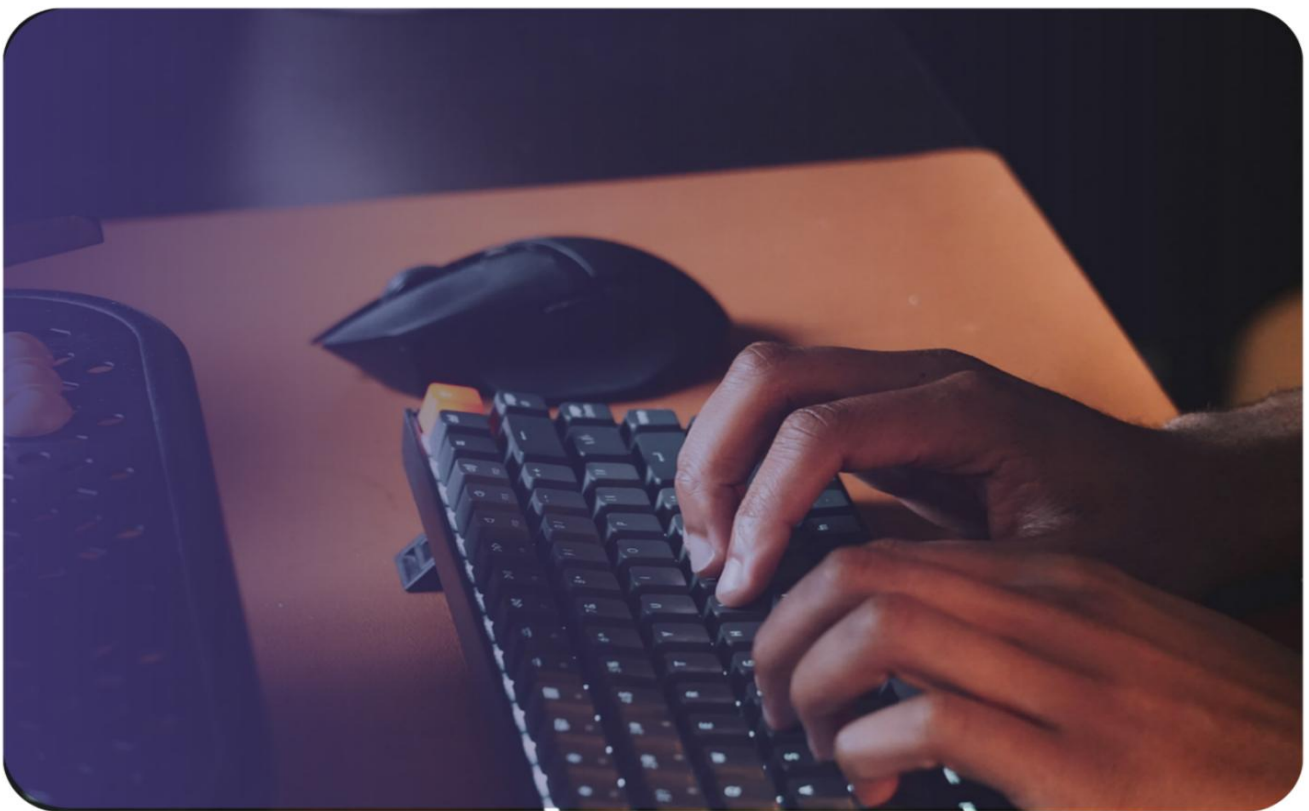
11. Employer opportunities and challenges

Employers need to invest in all areas of the digital frontline responders' work cycle. Most participants experienced some form of screening and all participants received some form of support, though often limited, while employed. However, very few were offered support once their formal employment ended. Considering the lasting impact of their jobs, this is a serious omission.

Participants confirmed the value of accessible, qualified, and experienced mental health support. Employers must prioritise mental health resources, such as accessible and informed counselling services, peer support programmes, and training in wellbeing strategies. Employers should focus on creating a culture of mutual respect and collaboration, fostering trust among team members, and addressing conflicts promptly. Regular check-ins, team-building activities and open discussions promote a supportive environment where responders feel connected and valued. Participants identified the importance of flexible work conditions, regular breaks, spaces to unwind and other similar wellbeing enhancing policies. Employers should incorporate these as a minimum.

Participants often described feeling ignored and under-valued. The work of digital frontline responders should be consistently recognised, valued, and understood. Employers can achieve this by celebrating achievements, providing transparent communication about organisational impact, and ensuring that responders understand how their efforts contribute to broader goals. Similarly, participants described tokenistic gestures of praise or concern which were damaging to their sense of wellbeing such as generic "well done" emails. Open communication channels are essential for understanding the evolving challenges responders face. Employers should establish regular forums or meetings where responders can share insights, voice concerns, and suggest improvements. Transparency is crucial, input from frontline responders need to be acted upon and, when their requests are not possible, restraints should be explained.

Establishing formal feedback loops regarding the outcomes of cases increases wellbeing through promoting a sense of purpose and job satisfaction. Employers should create structured mechanisms for responders to receive updates and insights about the impact of their work. Frontline responders should be given opportunities for professional growth to enhance their skills and career trajectories. Participants valued connecting with other digital frontline responders for knowledge sharing and the creation of a professional community. Employers can facilitate these connections by organising events, supporting memberships in professional associations, and encouraging participation in online forums. Such networks allow responders to learn from one another, share best practices and stay informed.

12. Recommendations

- When recruiting for digital frontline responder posts, prior employment in the area should be taken into consideration for assessing burnout and for prioritising mental health monitoring, as length of service in this area heightens the likelihood of trauma.

- Health and wellbeing programmes should support workers after they leave their current post, even if they leave the organisation.

- Wellbeing programmes for digital frontline responders should include mechanisms to help individuals assess their own needs for counselling, ensuring they do not ignore mental illness symptoms, and have access to support as and when they need it. Many digital frontline responders highly value time away from working directly with potentially traumatic content whether that be via paid leave or by undertaking other tasks. Creating a varied workload with frequent downtime is best practice for these workers.

- Digital frontline responders are the essential safety workers of the Internet and organisations should shine an internal and external marketing light on the important work they do, communicating organisational pride in their successes to combat some digital frontline responders' feelings of being part of an isolated, and often hidden workforce.

- Develop performance metrics recognising a specialised skillset for this cohort of workers no matter what type of organisation they work for, as they are neither customer service professionals, software engineers, or rank and file officers.

- Work with other organisations to create systems to share feedback and validate the work being done as a community to combat online child sexual abuse and exploitation. This would help to raise levels of job satisfaction that could combat high levels of turnover.

- Proactively help digital frontline responders develop international networks to promote professional best practices and share learnings, tools and expertise.

- Technology tools to support digital frontline responders' health and wellbeing should be specifically developed for them and should support their reporting tasks, as well as their identification tasks.

Footnotes

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Acknowledgments

About WeProtect Global Alliance

WeProtect Global Alliance brings together experts from government, the private sector, civil society and intergovernmental organisations. Together, they generate political commitment and practical approaches to build a digital world designed to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse online.

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