

Introduction: Wellbeing at work

Kerry McKay, Co-founder & Director - The Healthy Working Partnership



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Health and wellbeing in the workplace is often tackled purely from the perspective of reducing absence and maximising employee engagement and productivity. As Co-founder and Director of The Healthy Working Partnership, Kerry McKay gives an insight into the increasing pressure on employers to get wellbeing right.



Getting wellbeing right

A holistic approach to wellbeing is being more widely adopted, with the importance not just on workplace hazards but on the overall physical, psychological and social health of employees.

Last year saw a crucial development with the launch of the government's Improving Health and Work: Changing Lives document, in response to the Dame Carol Black report, *Working for a Healthier Tomorrow*. The paper highlighted the role of employers and particularly managers, in improving health and wellbeing, and suggested the introduction of the 'fit note' rather than the 'sick note', in the hope of fundamentally changing the way that sickness absence is approached in this country.

The importance of employee health and wellbeing is even more important now in a recession, as the increased pressures it places on employees has the potential to detrimentally affect their health, engagement and performance. For example, research by BT

Business found that 37 percent of UK workers are putting in more hours at the office to cope with growing workloads, with the average employee working the equivalent of an extra day a week. Despite more streamlined budgets, employers must continue to prioritise workplace wellbeing or they will feel the consequences now and when the economy improves.

What is health and wellbeing in the workplace? Wellbeing in the workplace incorporates more than just healthy eating and when done properly it should not sit on its own within an organisation but form an integral part of the company culture and be central to the people and business agenda. It is useful to view workplace wellbeing as being a 'tri-partite' balance between employees, managers and the organisation as a

whole, each of which have a different role and responsibility in creating a culture of wellbeing and each of which is dependant on the other.

From an employee perspective, a culture of wellbeing should ensure that employees have the skills and capabilities to engage in their role fully and productively, incorporating the physical, psychological and social factors which impact their ability to carry out their job. These factors can range from their physical health, to management and team interaction, as well as personal issues and work/life balance.

While the organisation undoubtedly has its role to play, employees themselves have a responsibility for their own wellbeing within the workplace and have a duty to ensure they are able to come to work and engage fully at the level required. If wellbeing support programmes, such as employee assistance programmes or fitness awareness programmes, exist then staff should look to take advantage of these if required.

An important issue for employees is the crossover between work and life, incorporating social, personal health and psychological challenges. Increased pressure at home will inevitably have an impact on work and vice versa so both areas should be considered within employee wellbeing. Communication is also crucial and employees should be able to communicate and have honest discussions with their manager around issues such as performance and absence. Employees should also be able to communicate effectively with other team members, be aware of their different roles and responsibilities and how each impacts upon their own productivity and performance and vice versa.

The relationship between employee and line manager is fundamental to creating and maintaining a culture of wellbeing and there is a very clear correlation between good line management and reduced absence. This was one of the key findings in the Black report, which stated: "Good line management can lead to good health, well-being and improved performance." Line managers should be able to communicate openly and honestly with individuals and teams regarding issues such as performance and absence, as well as explaining overall business objectives. They also need to understand and communicate what their organisation has in place in terms of support including case management and wellbeing programmes, to ensure that employees can take advantage of these where appropriate.

Finally, the organisation's role in workplace wellbeing is to establish the framework of policy, productivity, performance and business objectives

to ensure that the company as a whole has a healthy culture. HR has a key role in driving this forward. Policies should cover areas such as absence, recruitment, retention and performance but they must be relevant and based on the needs of the organisation. So rather than implementing activities based on the latest buzz word or hot topic in the press, they should instead reflect the company's own data, whether quantitative or qualitative, with interventions targeted accordingly.

Once policies and processes are in place, it is the responsibility of the organisation to ensure that line managers are aware of these and provide any training which might be necessary. This enables managers to communicate initiatives throughout the organisation and set a good example for others to follow. The organisation must also demonstrate it takes a positive, fair and supportive approach towards issues such as absence and performance. This includes acting appropriately if an employee has taken time off unnecessarily but being understanding and supportive when absence is due to a genuine health problem.

Why is it important? Organisations that fail to address health and wellbeing in the workplace will undoubtedly see a decrease in the ability of employees and teams to perform their roles effectively and ultimately a decrease in productivity of the business as a whole. At an individual level, it can lead to a lack of engagement and a crossover of boundaries between work and personal life, having a detrimental impact on both sides. At a manager level, it can increase the number of difficult situations within teams and decrease the ability of managers to cope with these situations and resolve problems.

Effects on the organisation as a whole may take longer to become apparent but also take longer to rectify. Companies which don't see the importance of a wellbeing culture will fail to get the best performance out of employees and this will ultimately affect the bottom line. Recruitment is another area to consider and in the age of employer branding, where an employer's image and perception are everything, a wellbeing strategy is increasingly seen as a fundamental attribute of a good employer. In this year's *Sunday Times* Best Companies list, 95 percent of organisations in the top 20 big firms have a wellbeing programme in place. Employers must also now consider Generation Y (those born between 1981 and 1991) who are believed to have greater expectations from the workplace than any generation before them, along with an increased desire to shape their jobs to fit their lives rather than adapt their lives to the workplace.

These days, potential employees will want to see that an organisation has wellbeing policies and

initiatives in place to provide them with a healthy working environment, flexibility and work-life balance. Those companies which ignore this are likely to find it hard to attract the best talent, while also struggling to retain their current workforce. The recession has the potential to bring out the best and worst in people - the most diligent employees may feel they need to work even harder, putting in extra hours and keeping their heads down, while others may feel the increased pressure provides an excuse to take unnecessary days off. A recent survey by the CIPD shows that private sector employees are taking less sick days as a result of the recession - the average worker took 6.4 days off in 2008, down from 7.2 days in 2007 - but employers must ensure that this doesn't mask 'presenteeism' where employees are coming to work but not performing, or suffering with stress or other problems as a result of increased pressure. It is important to be aware of the psychological



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health issues that could affect employees during the recession and have initiatives in place to address these. Redundancies, restructuring and change will leave many staff feeling insecure, unsettled and disengaged and it is vital that they are supported in the right way. Communication and transparency are key to ensuring employees are aware of what is happening and the impact it will have on them. Again, line manager support is vital so they are able to support their teams and manage absence, 'presenteeism' and performance.

It is also possible that employees' physical health will suffer, particularly if they are working longer hours and don't have time to eat properly or exercise. Managers must also look out for inappropriate coping strategies such as increased

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alcohol, drug abuse or excessive coffee consumption. HR is central to creating and maintaining a wellbeing culture at an organisational level, particularly where absence management is concerned. It is important there is a clear, positive, fair and supportive absence management policy in place, which managers and employees are able to engage with and put into practice. Absence should also be recorded to inform the organisation of its 'health status' and identify any problem areas. Despite the importance of this, the CIPD found that one in five organisations still don't monitor absence levels and only 40 percent monitor the cost of absence.



Fostering an open and transparent culture will ensure that employees are more forthcoming in communicating any long term health problems and won't feel the need to hide their reasons for missing work



HR also has a key role to play in training and development to ensure line managers have the skills and capabilities to manage wellbeing, performance and attendance and carry out the necessary risk assessments for health, wellbeing and stress. If line managers have a good understanding of their responsibilities then this will create pockets of good practice throughout the organisation and an overall healthy culture. One critical area to be aware of is stress risk assessment, covering the psychological health of employees. This has traditionally formed part of the health and safety agenda and is similar to when looking at hazards in the workplace. However, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has recently developed six stress management standards, outlining the

characteristics of an organisation in which work-related stress is being effectively managed and controlled. These provide a good blueprint for organisations to follow:

Demands: this includes workload, work patterns and the work environment.

Control: how much say the person has in the way they do their work.

Support: this includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.

Relationships: this includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.

Role: whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that they do not have conflicting roles.

Change: how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation.

To support this approach, organisations should also ensure there is professional support in place, such as occupational health and case management (the coordination of health, legal or other services), should managers or individuals need it. Again, it is crucial that these services are promoted and communicated effectively so employees are aware they exist. The Black review put the wider economic costs of ill-health in Britain at over £100bn a year, showing that wellbeing in the workplace is no longer an optional extra. If managed effectively, a wellbeing culture can bring real value to an organisation, reducing absence and increasing productivity at the same time.

Wellbeing in the workplace doesn't need to be complex or costly; it is about communication, the constant involvement of line managers and making policies relevant to the needs of the organisation. If done in this way, the long-term business benefits will make it worth the investment.

For further information:

www.thehealthyworkingpartnership.com

www.thehrdirector.com

Employee mental health survey summary

Research commissioned by national employment charity, Shaw Trust, into mental health conditions in the work place, reveals a staggering 57.1 percent of UK HR workers wouldn't feel happy to disclose a mental ill health condition such as depression to their HR department.

The research found that only 32.1 percent of people working in HR would reveal a mental ill health condition to their line manager, while fewer still (17.9 percent) would be happy to discuss such an issue with other colleagues. Tim Cooper, Shaw Trust Managing Director comments: "The Office of National Statistics estimates that one in six people may suffer from a mental ill health condition at any one time. Despite this, our research illustrates that HR workers are very reluctant to reveal such a condition, particularly in the current economic climate in which workers are concerned about showing any sign of perceived weakness."

The research illustrated a clear need for a change in attitudes with 33.4 percent of professional HR respondents saying that the reason they wouldn't want to reveal a mental ill health condition was because they would either feel ashamed or worried they would be treated differently. Meanwhile, 16.7 percent of HR workers were concerned their employer wouldn't be sympathetic, and the same number worried disclosing a mental health condition would hamper their chances of promotion. Professor Cary L Cooper, CBE, Professor of Organisational Psychology and Health at Lancaster University comments: "People have become more comfortable talking about physical illnesses over the years, however there is still a huge stigma associated with having a mental ill health condition. Dealing with such a problem often leaves people feeling awkward and a culture of secrecy seems to have emerged in which people are frightened to confide in others."

Such thoughts were echoed in the findings, as 42.9 percent of HR workers felt they would receive more support at work for a physical disability (than for a mental health disorder), with only 10.7 percent feeling that they would receive more support for a mental ill health disorder. Tim continues: "Businesses need to create an environment in which people not only feel confident enough to discuss a mental health condition but in which they can also receive the support they need to continue making a valuable contribution."

For further information:

www.shaw-trust.org.uk