Prevention is Better Than Cure: Wellbeing at Work

Workplace wellbeing is climbing up the business agenda as increasing numbers of organisations recognise the benefits such initiatives can bring. This article explores what wellbeing at work involves, the cost of ill health to organisations, how wellbeing initiatives can benefit employers, and how organisations can introduce them into their workplace.

What is wellbeing?
According to the CIPD, wellbeing is

"... creating an environment to promote a state of contentment which allows an employee to flourish and achieve their full potential for the benefit of themselves and their organisation." [1]

Previously, when people thought about health in the workplace, it was usually associated with 'health and safety' – minimising physical risk, reporting accidents etc. However, traditional occupational hazards, while still important, are now considered alongside increasing concerns about the relationship between work and mental and physical wellbeing. Managing wellbeing is a holistic approach, encompassing physical, mental and social health to create enhanced business performance. It focuses on prevention and managing the healthy so they are less likely to fall sick. Those employees who are physically and emotionally well will perform better and are likely to be more engaged at work. The health and wellbeing of organisations, employees and society are interconnected and organisations today face pressure to address workplace wellbeing from several areas:

1. From themselves – as they face growing sickness and absence costs which damage performance, productivity, growth and reputation.
2. From employees, who now expect their employers to help support their personal wellbeing.
3. From legal and government policies which require organisations to recognise their own impact on their employees' health in order to help with the government's objectives of getting more of the working age population back into the workplace.

Measuring the cost of employee ill health
All employers have a duty of care to their employees but when times are tight and budgets are being squeezed, many might think that investing in employee health is a luxury rather than a necessity. [2] However, this could not be further from the truth. The average level of employee absence is eight days per employee per year, with an average cost of £666 per employee per year. [3] This does not include the indirect costs of absence, such as overtime payments to cover a colleague's absence, or employing and training a temporary worker to replace the absent colleague in the short-term, which can bring the cost to over £1000 per
employee per year. It stands to reason, therefore, that investing in a fit, motivated and productive workforce makes good business sense.

Health management expert Ron Goetzel states that with an investment of $100 to $150 (approximately £70-£106) per employee per year in health and wellbeing support, an employer can expect an average return on investment of around $3 for every $1 invested. [4] This amounts to a 200% return on investment per employee per year. However, Goetzel warns that these returns are not typically realised until two or three years into the wellness programme, so wellbeing initiatives should be recognised as long-term investments, not short-term wins.

The most common wellbeing issues
Although the most common causes of short-term absence for employees are minor illnesses such as colds, flu and stomach upsets, the two most common self reported causes of employee ill health are musculo-skeletal disorders (MSDs) and stress. MSDs (particularly back pain) are a leading cause of long-term sickness absence in the UK, while a similar picture is found in the USA, where MSDs account for 33% of lost working days per year. [5] However, many organisations can combat this through simple measures such as effective training in manual handling and providing ergonomically designed workstations.

Stress is the other major problem facing both businesses and employees. In the UK, estimates from the Labour Force survey revealed that approximately 13.5 million working days were lost in the UK in 2007/08 due to work related stress, depression or anxiety. This equates to an average of 30.6 working days lost per affected case, making stress the largest contributor to the overall estimated annual work days lost from work-related ill health. [6] During turbulent economic times, with fears over job security and financial wellbeing, or during periods of considerable change, these levels are likely to rise dramatically.

"Increased stress and anxiety created by financial and job insecurity now pose a very real risk to employee health." [7]

During a downturn, fears about job security can give rise to the issue of presenteeism - people may be working longer hours than ever before in order to secure their job and avoid the next round of redundancies – all these anxieties can lead to significant stress. [8]

While responsibility for managing wellbeing lies principally with the individual employee, managers and leaders still have an important role to play in supporting and promoting good physical and emotional health.

The benefits of workplace wellbeing initiatives
An increasing number of managers are acknowledging the improvements they have seen in their teams, departments and organisations following the introduction of wellbeing initiatives. By supporting employee wellbeing, employers may see improvements in:

- **Retention** of existing employees, which can be greatly enhanced by wellbeing initiatives. Employees who are happier, healthier and have more energy will feel more supported by, and committed to, the organisation, which leads to improved morale and job satisfaction. Employees who value and respect the fact that their employer cares about them and will therefore be less likely to seek alternative employment.

- **Organisational reputation and image**, leading to better recruitment prospects. Wellbeing initiatives can be highly beneficial to employers who are trying to recruit new talent. As the popularity of wellbeing initiatives grows, it will become increasingly difficult for employers to attract the best talent unless their wellbeing offerings are up to scratch.
• **Quality** and **quantity** of production, as a result of reduced absenteeism. People who are happier and healthier at work perform better, leading to improvements in productivity and bottom line profits.

• **Business costs** – there will be less sick pay, a reduction in overtime payments or payments to temporary staff to cover employee absence. There may also be a reduction in insurance premiums.

• Reduced levels of **job accidents** and injuries, and **compensation** claims.

**So how do you promote wellbeing in practice?**

Promoting wellbeing at work involves educating employees and managers alike of the importance of protecting wellbeing, and deciding on the most appropriate initiatives to help do so. The main steps in promoting wellbeing at work are as follows:

1. Identifying the **level of need** within the organisation and the impact of sickness/health-related issues.

2. Deciding on the **focus** of the wellbeing initiative(s).

3. Defining the **target audience**.

4. Setting **objectives** i.e. the overall purpose of the initiative.

5. Deciding on the type of intervention. Many organisations offer a dizzying array of initiatives to support the wellbeing of their workforce, for example:

   • in-house occupational health provision (access to professional medical staff such as GPs and/or nurses)
   • private healthcare and insurance
   • free/discounted gym memberships
   • smoking cessation clinics
   • free fruit and healthy options in staff restaurants
   • counselling services
   • ‘cycle to work’ schemes
   • employee assistance programmes (EAPs)

Howeover, organisations don't need to spend a fortune on employee wellbeing: even those with limited resources can still promote wellness at work through **cost-effective solutions** such as:

• encouraging flexible working or giving employees more choice over their working hours
• keeping an eye on employees' working habits – making sure they are not working long hours or coming into work when they are ill (if someone is consistently working long hours, they could be a prime candidate for time management training)
• sending out promotional emails with health/wellbeing tips
• adding health-related information to their intranet, including online health assessments
• including health tips in employee payslips
• creating wellbeing library, with books on healthy eating and nutrition, exercise DVDs and relaxation CDs
• providing comfortable, quiet areas where people can take a break
• ensuring managers set a good example by taking their lunch breaks, arriving and leaving on time, and taking all their annual leave allowance

6. Identifying **resources** required.

7. Creating a realistic **budget**.
8. Securing **buy-in** by presenting the business case.

9. Involving the right **people**.

10. Promoting/communicating the initiative.

11. Putting the plan into **action**.

12. **Evaluating** and measuring success.

It is important to remember that there is **no off the shelf, one-size fits all approach** to managing wellbeing at work. Different initiatives will suit different workplaces: any measures implemented should be appropriate to that particular organisation’s situation and available resources.

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**Top tips for promoting workplace wellbeing**

Encouraging people to take the first steps towards improving their wellbeing can be a real challenge. The biggest obstacle is likely to be getting people out of their bad habits and into healthier ones. Organisations can do this by:

- **educating** all employees on the importance of looking after their own wellbeing
- making it easier for them to adopt healthy habits e.g. by providing access to healthier food options, nutritional information, opportunities to take physical exercise, counselling services, relaxation/stress management techniques
- giving people more **control** over their workload, helping them plan their work through effective time management techniques and allowing them to work more flexibly
- **communicating** effectively – letting employees know what is going on in the organisation to avoid rumour-mongering and gossip which can cause unnecessary anxiety and stress

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**Conclusion**

While work can have a positive impact on our personal health and wellbeing, an increasing number of organisations are discovering that by managing employee health rather than sickness through workplace wellbeing programmes they are likely to reap significant rewards. Wellbeing programmes can significantly help to cut the costs associated with poor employee health, including absenteeism, poor performance and productivity. Healthy and well motivated employees will have a positive impact on the productivity and effectiveness of a business, as improved wellbeing improves employee motivation and engagement, which in turn improves performance, increasing productivity and profits.

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[2] ‘Duty of care’ is the requirement by law to take ‘reasonable care’ of employee health and safety, including both physical and mental health.


[8] Presenteeism: the feeling that you must show up for work even if you are too sick or stressed or distracted to be productive; the feeling that you need to work extra hours even if you have no extra work to do.