

Busting the myths of work-related wellbeing

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In the first of a series of articles on work-related wellbeing, Cass Coulston and Myanna Duncan reveal the true drivers behind this growing organisational imperative

Investment on corporate wellbeing initiatives is forecast to double over the next 10 years from a global spend of \$50bn in 2022 to [\\$100bn by 2030](#). Given that [7 in 10 employees globally](#) are struggling, this is investment in the right direction. However, attempts to step change employee wellbeing have not yet had the required impact, with [poor mental health costs for UK employers](#) alone [rising by 25%](#) since the pandemic. Consequently, now is an important inflection point to consider exactly what needs to change to enable true progress towards creating a thriving workforce.

Research shows that wellbeing correlates strongly with several [positive business outcomes](#) including better engagement, higher retention, greater psychological safety, improved team relations, satisfaction, productivity and performance. Today, employee well-being doesn't just drive other measures, it has itself become a critical business measure of success.

But it's not about increasing yoga and meditation classes or such 'one-off' interventions. While these practices have well known benefits, they are not hitting the mark in terms of tackling the root causes of the upcoming 'ill-being' pandemic we are at risk of facing in our workplaces. This very real possibility can, and will, manifest itself in increasing levels of burnout within both employees and indeed teams. A thriving workforce therefore requires a more inclusive strategy which embeds wellbeing into the experience that people live daily. This is at the essence of how people work together.

Teams are asking for their leaders to demonstrate the same qualities and skills many showed during the pandemic

What exactly is work-related wellbeing?

Wellbeing has been studied for decades. While numerous theoretical models exist, it can be challenging to arrive at just one description of exactly what wellbeing is. Nonetheless there appear to be some [clear component parts](#) that make up wellbeing.

One distinctive category of wellbeing is social; feeling connected, included, engaged, and trusted. Emotion is another category, characterised by feeling psychologically safe, having emotional equanimity, feeling joyful. A third and important category is psychological, including intellectual engagement and flow, purpose, opportunity for growth and autonomy.

A fourth category one can consider is health, including balance and boundaries, physical vitality, and energy. A significant final component is determined by self-evaluation, and importantly, all wellbeing categories are interconnected.

Recent research conducted at King's College London, highlights the importance of considering the entire employee experience when considering well-being – including culture, context, policies, [communication norms](#) – alongside stakeholder, leader and team dynamics playing a significantly influential role.

Whose responsibility is it anyway?

While burnout is experienced by individuals and can be influenced by a unique psychobiology, including genetics and lifestyle, research shows that the most powerful drivers of burnout are not the individual but [an overwhelm of job demands](#) compared to job resources. These can be emotional, mental, psychological, or physical and are more likely to emanate from the 'system' that the individual is working within, than the individual themselves. From our [recent research](#) into what creates and inhibits thriving hybrid teams, this can include a communication overload, a pressure to feel always connected, a lack of focus and flow and more transactional relationships with leadership and peers.

It is therefore important to consider the role that both the individual and the collective environment plays, acknowledging that both are responsible for creating a thriving place to work.

Employers need a tailored approach to their specific context that targets everyone within the workforce in a proactive way. It starts by creating a holistic view of what well-being looks like for individuals, teams, and organisations as a whole.

Creating workplaces where people can thrive

Leaders are social influencers, empowering their teams to thrive. It's perhaps no surprise that leaders need to be supported by the organisation to enable this. From our research, teams are asking for their leaders to demonstrate the same qualities and skills many showed during the pandemic, including vulnerability, care, compassion and clear communication and appreciation.

Leaders are needing to learn new skills and practices within a hybrid way of working, which brings increased pressure and accountability to care for their people's wellbeing while they are also struggling. Yet as role models, they play a vital role in giving permission and becoming advocates of wellbeing, creating a healthier workforce.

Five wellbeing enablers at work

If leaders and organisations recognise the importance of nurturing wellbeing as a core aspect of the employee experience, there is an opportunity to incorporate new practices into ways of working that inspire:

Autonomy and control

Be clear on what is in your team's control and what is not. How might you give more power and flexibility, at the same time as creating a psychologically safe culture of accountability?

Clarity in communication

Create shared norms of how to communicate purposefully and effectively both virtually and face to face. Reduce uncertainty of expectations with clear communication of how and when tasks need to be completed.

Meaning and competence

Ensure that work and roles are valued, with a clear 'why' and connect to meaningful measures of success. In some regards, this isn't new – the key is that leaders need to be much more deliberate in this area to make a successful impact in a hybrid environment.

Belonging and connection

Integrate acts of inclusion, safety and create a sense of who as a team, connecting to team members individually and as a collective. Purpose also comes from the people we work with, so how might you craft a clear identity?

Collective flow

Create focus and flow in work schedules versus teams feeling the need to be always on, leading to unproductive task switching and attention diffusion.

Thriving organisations, thriving teams and thriving leaders should become the new 'norm' and this starts by asking the right questions. How might you become more active in shaping your own wellbeing and playing a part in shaping the wellbeing of others?

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