

The Importance of Prioritising Employee Well-Being

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People are what keep a business thriving. But to do that, those people have to thrive, too.

Employee well-being is a broad term - it covers every aspect of someone's working life, including their physical, mental and financial health. Many things can contribute to it, from relationships with colleagues to the workplace itself. Employee well-being isn't something that just affects employees, though - it has a huge impact on a business and its success.

Today, we'll be examining the growing need for employee wellbeing initiatives, how prioritising employee wellbeing can benefit a business, and why leaders need to take responsibility for the wellbeing of their team.

"Executives realize now, more than ever, that a resilient workforce is critical to an organization's success – and building a resilient workforce means investing in employee wellbeing." These are the words of Jen Fisher [1], Deloitte's chief wellbeing officer.

Traditionally, investing in employee well-being has been seen as a way to prevent absences and workplace accidents. Those are still really important priorities, of course. But, leaders are becoming increasingly aware that they need to take a much broader approach to their staff's well-being.

Part of the push towards better employee well-being is a growing awareness of the scale of the global mental health crisis. The World Economic Forum estimates that 1 in 4 of us will experience some form of mental illness at some point in our lives [2].

While work can help to boost someone's mental health by giving them a purpose, it can also be a major cause of stress. We can see this in action with the rise of workplace burnout. 77% of the people who responded to a recent survey from Deloitte [3] reported that they'd experienced burnout in their current role. People are finding it increasingly difficult to switch off from work, with digital technology putting pressure on people to be available at all times.

The humanitarian cost of this mental health crisis is huge, but there's a financial cost as well. Deloitte's analysis [4] shows that the cost of poor mental health for UK employers could be as much as £56 billion a year.

There's another worrying trend to think about, and that's presenteeism.

Have you ever dragged yourself into work even though you were feeling ill or burnt out? Maybe you had an urgent deadline. Maybe you convinced yourself that it just wasn't bad enough to justify a sick day. But be honest: were you really able to put in quality work that day?

That's presenteeism: where people feel they have to be at work even though they're unwell. They might be afraid of being criticised for taking time off. They might be afraid of falling behind with their work. If it's a chronic health condition, they might feel they have no choice but to try and push through.

Whatever the cause, it's bad news for everyone involved. Writing in HBR [5], Paul Hemp states that it can cut individual productivity by over a third. It's easy to understand why. As Hemp puts it, "When people don't feel good, they simply don't do their best work." So, not only is your staff member suffering, but their work is, too.

In the Chartered Institute of Personnel's 2022 survey [6] into health and well-being at work, 65% of those who responded had witnessed people working while unwell in the workplace. That figure rose to 81% for people working from home. When you take into account invisible conditions and mental health struggles that might not be obvious from the outside, those numbers could be even higher.

Prioritising employee well-being helps to prevent damage from burnout and presenteeism. It addresses the root cause by assisting people to work on their physical and mental health, making it less likely that they'll become unwell. And just as importantly, it creates a culture where people feel they can be honest about their health, ask for help and take the time they need to recover.

But it isn't all about preventing negatives. In fact, employee well-being can be a massive positive for your business. Let's take a quick look at the gains that high levels of employee well-being can bring.

There is a growing belief that employee well-being adds to a business's success. A 2019 study by the London School of Economics and Gallup, which examined data from over 200 organisations, found a clear correlation between employee well-being and a firm's productivity and performance [7].

It's easy to understand how well-being could boost productivity. Healthier staff can approach their work with more energy and focus. They're also much more likely to be engaged and motivated to do their best for a business they believe is looking out for them.

Employee well-being can also have a big impact on recruitment. A 2022 cross-industry study by Deloitte found that 59% of employees would consider leaving their jobs for one that offered a better well-being programme [8].

Crucially, employee well-being also helps you to retain talent. According to data collected by Gallup [9], employees who strongly believe their employer cares about their well-being are 69% less likely to look for another job. They're also five times as likely to recommend their workplace to other people.

That last statistic touches on something really important. It matters to employees that the business cares about them. So, let's finish by looking at why it's so key for leaders to take responsibility for their staff's wellbeing.

In its Wellbeing at Work Fact Sheet [10], the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development explains that many employee well-being initiatives fall down because they're too isolated from the realities of day-to-day work. It states, "To gain real benefit, employee wellbeing priorities must be integrated throughout an organisation, embedded in its culture, leadership and people management."

In other words, employee well-being can't just be a program that you leave to someone else. It has to be a guiding principle that factors into every decision you make for the business. Otherwise, you'll only address the most obvious issues. Treating employee well-being as an add-on will also make everyone feel as though their well-being really isn't that important to the organisation.

As a leader, you also have a huge amount of personal influence over people's well-being at work. That's because you set the standards and expectations.

Of course, it isn't your place to be a therapist or to try to solve your staff's problems. Instead, you should create an atmosphere where people feel able to

prioritise their own well-being, make healthy decisions and have honest conversations about how they're doing.

You also need to make sure the support you offer is clearly signposted for anyone who might need it. A lot of the time, people aren't aware of the support available and may not be comfortable asking their line manager. A well-being program is only effective if people know about it.

Lastly, you should think about the power of modelling healthy behaviour. If you lead by example by looking out for your own well-being, it will have a positive ripple effect throughout your organisation.

For example, if you respond to emails outside of office hours, it sends a message to your team that you expect them to do the same. But if you leave things until you get to work the next morning, other people will feel more comfortable switching off at night too.

Today, we've discovered prioritising employee well-being isn't simply the right thing to do for your employees. It's the right thing to do for your business, too. It stops productivity from being lost through presenteeism and boosts employee performance.

It's also a key factor in attracting and retaining the talent you need to keep business booming. If you can show candidates that your business will help them with their well-being goals, you can attract the best possible people. And if you make good on those promises, people are more likely to want to stay with the business and to promote it as a great place to work.

As a leader, you have a big part to play in your staff's well-being. By proving that you care about them, you create a culture of loyalty, empathy, and respect. That culture will empower your staff to make healthy decisions and do their best work.

Take a step towards that today by familiarising yourself with the well-being support your organisation already offers, then send out a quick reminder to your staff. There might be someone struggling in silence right now who really needs a gentle nudge in the right direction.

Thanks for listening. Have a productive day!

[1] *Is There a Doctor in the Boardroom? 6 Health Chiefs Explain Why Employee Wellbeing Matters More Than Ever*, World Economic Forum (2023)
<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/09/is-there-a-doctor-in-the-boardroom-here-s-how-6-organizations-are-prioritizing-employee-wellbeing/>

[2] *Here Are Five Priorities for Better Cooperation on Mental Health*, World Economic

Forum (2018)

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/11/five-ways-mental-health-care-better-depression/>

[3] *Workplace Burnout Survey*, Deloitte (2018)

<https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/burnout-survey.html>

[4] *Poor Mental Health Costs UK Employers up to £56 Billion a Year*, Deloitte (2022)

<https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/press-releases/articles/poor-mental-health-costs-uk-employers-up-to-pound-56-billion-a-year.html>

[5] *Presenteeism: At Work—But Out of It*, Paul Hemp (2004)

<https://hbr.org/2004/10/presenteeism-at-work-but-out-of-it>

[6] *Health and Well-Being at Work*, CIPD (2023)

<https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/reports/health-well-being-work/#main>

[7] *Happy Employees and Their Impact on Firm Performance*, Christian Krekel, George Ward, Jan-Emmanuel De Neve (2019)

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2019/07/15/happy-employees-and-their-impact-on-firm-performance/>

[8] *Why Reporting Workplace Well-Being Metrics Is a Good Idea*,

Colleen Bordeaux, Jen Fisher, Anh Nguyen Phillips (2022)

<https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/insights/environmental-social-governance/employee-workplace-wellbeing-metrics.html>

[9] *Showing That You Care About Employee Wellbeing*, Dan Witters (2022)

<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/391739/showing-care-employee-wellbeing.aspx>

[10] *Wellbeing at Work*, CIPD (2023)

<https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/factsheets/well-being-factsheet/#main>