

## Employee wellbeing: Is it at the top of your agenda?

In an economic downturn, ensuring the health and wellbeing of your staff is more important than ever; yet in a bid to cut costs, some organisations may choose to axe some initiatives. Lucie Mitchell discovers that this is the last thing you should be doing.



We are not experiencing good times at the moment. The recession means that redundancies, and therefore workloads, are on the increase, which means that stress and anxiety levels could be going through the roof. And when that happens, businesses start to see a loss of productivity and motivation amongst staff, which in turn affects the bottom line.

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Mark Winwood, AXA ICAS

This goes to show that employee health and wellbeing really should be of paramount importance to HR departments right now – and the proof is in the pudding. Global research at the end of last year, by HR and benefits consulting firm Buck Consultants, revealed that workplace wellness strategies are rapidly growing in popularity across the globe. In Europe, the number of organisations that have implemented a wellbeing programme has doubled to 40% in the last year, the survey found.

Plus, in this year's Sunday Times Best Companies list, 95% of organisations in the top 20 big firms have a wellbeing programme in place, as well as 88% of medium-sized companies.

Keeping staff healthy in this current climate is really important, says Oliver Gray, MD of energiseYou, a provider of wellbeing services to the UK's corporate sector. "At the moment, people have to work even harder because many companies are going through redundancies and there are less people doing more work – so productivity is really important, which is helped by having healthy staff," he adds.

Mark Winwood, director of psychological services at employee wellbeing and assistance company AXA ICAS, agrees and adds that after a redundancy exercise, the health and wellbeing of the people who remain is more important than ever before because they would be missed twice as much if they were to become unwell.

He also points to survivor guilt: "Their anxiety levels will rise because when they see their colleagues being made redundant, they have anxiety about the safety of their own role, but then they feel guilty about having those anxieties because they've still got their job. The next thing is that the work that their redundant colleagues were doing will be loaded onto their workload and they start feeling resentment."

### Wellbeing doesn't have to cost the earth

Of course, in an economic downturn, businesses will be looking to cut costs as much as possible, but don't make wellbeing one of the strategies to face the chop – in fact, there are numerous initiatives that you can put in place that don't have to cost much at all.

"One of the easiest things to do is a workstation assessment," advises Gray. "Many people go to work and sit in front of their computer and then don't move all day, so many health problems are caused because people are not set up correctly at their workstation. They don't know about taking regular breaks, or their posture is bad at their desk. That is a really simple and cost-effective thing for employers to set up."

Other options include subsidised gym membership for staff; exercise classes such as yoga; massage; flu jabs towards the end of the year; and health screening.

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Patricia Bacon, Instant Offices

One organisation that appears to have got it right is Instant Offices, a provider of serviced offices and flexible office space, which won the 'best for wellbeing' award in this year's 'Sunday Times Best Small Companies to Work For' list. Its sales and HR director, Patricia Bacon, explains the wellbeing initiatives on offer at the company:

"We provide free mineral water, fruit, cereal bars, herbal teas, breakfast cereals, and so on. Many people might say that that is standard but it provides people with that extra little bit, particularly in these recessionary times. We also have a daily tea trolley at 4pm, where a different member of staff brings round tea and biscuits each day."

Other schemes they have implemented include corporate membership to a gym, free use of company bicycles, hypnosis for people who want to give up smoking, early finish on a Friday, football tournaments, charity fun runs, ski trips, sabbaticals, and a duvet morning on an employee's birthday.

"We also have an away day every six months, with a company update, and within that we do a straw poll to find out what people like and don't like. Our initiatives come out as a reaction to people telling us what they want, rather than a room of directors discussing it. It empowers people to have ideas," remarks Bacon.

The results speak for themselves. Bacon says that there are very few sick days amongst staff and they have a 7% to 8% staff turnover rate. She also remarks that the business continues to expand, with good revenues for the first quarter of this year. "I firmly believe that staff are more engaged as a result of us implementing these initiatives, which has a positive effect on what they are bringing into the business and therefore the bottom line."

### The key to success

So, the benefits of wellbeing initiatives are plain to see. But how do you ensure they are a success? "For HR, the key part is communication," says Gray. "The company must get behind it and communicate it well. When a CEO puts his or her name to it, that can make a big difference."

Winwood echoes these points: "With anything like this, people get very anxious about the unknown and it is very important to face these difficult conversations head on. One thing that I would always recommend is, if you have got any budget whatsoever for any development, is to train your managers in how to break bad news and communicate effectively."

Also, HR must measure the impact of the service they are providing, in terms of what employees think about it and what the benefits are. "The key challenge is first of all getting the budget agreed to do it and then demonstrating that the budget was well spent," comments Gray. "So it is very much about gaining employee feedback, measuring factors such as staff engagement, satisfaction and absence. I think that is probably the weakest issue out there at the moment – there are many companies implementing employee wellbeing programmes, but not enough measurement going on to demonstrate the benefits of them."

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It is also important for employers to take action if stress levels are rising amongst the workforce. There is no doubt that, due to the economy, the working environment can become more stressful and this must be recognised.

"Employers have really got to take a proactive approach to keeping staff happy, motivated and healthy during these times, otherwise there is going to be a lot more burn out and staff absence," warns Gray. "If people are unhappy, they will leave and go to an organisation where they look after their staff better – so it is also about staying ahead of the competition."

It is clear that wellbeing initiatives are not just a 'nice' thing to do for staff, they can actually make a financial impact to the bottom line, as Gray concludes: "HR must feel confident pushing employee wellbeing forward, not because it is a nice, fluffy thing, but because it can actually help the profits in the business."

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