

Wellness at Work: Enhancing the Quality of our Working Lives - Part 1 by Dr. Dawn Hillier

A job should be much more than simply a way of earning a living. It provides identity, contact and friendship with other people, a way of putting structure in your life and an opportunity to meet goals and to contribute.

From the literature and the case study we conclude that there are important key success benchmarks that need to be attended to in developing a strategy to increase wellness at work in organizations. However, whilst all employers know that the ability to manage people effectively is a critical skill, in practice, managers are rarely selected based on their proficiency at dealing with their employees. Instead, technical skills are the usual criteria for promotion and increased responsibility, which more often than not means that people managerial skills are lacking.

When companies fail to overcome this skill shortage with appropriate training and support, the result may be a workforce which is stressed, absent from work, giving sub-optimal performance, fearful and even when they are present in the workplace, distrusting of its employer, and generally not committed to the job. Such unbalanced work lives can lead to unhappiness, stress, physical and mental illness. Not surprisingly, many employees enduring such an environment intend to seek work elsewhere or become increasingly ill or disconnected from the organisation. The result for employers may include reduced efficiency, effectiveness, profitability, a rising wage bill, and the loss of those key employees who will drive the business forward.

Research has shown that a significant number of companies are failing to recognise that absence and stress are major risks for employers, and must be effectively managed like any other risk. These phenomena are usually symptoms of a deeper-running organizational malfunction, often related to management styles and the overall relationship between workers and their employers indicating serious and growing problems in the workplace. Key 'measurables' such as employee retention and the trust between workers and their leaders provide a yardstick to define the depth of these problems, demonstrating starkly the need to pay more than lip service to employee well-being. There is clear evidence that there is a continued, growing and costly disconnect between employees and their organizations. It uncovers a correlation between workers' dissatisfaction with employers' stress and absence management efforts, employees' trust in their organizations, and the impact of these factors on employee commitment.

Wellness at Work: Enhancing the Quality of our Working Lives - Part 2 by Dr. Dawn Hillier

Capturing senior management support is a vital step in the process of developing and sustaining wellness programmes. There are three important questions the wellness team need to answer before putting a case to senior managers:

1. What are the organization's short-term and long-term strategic priorities?
2. What benefits can be expected from your wellness initiative and what is the potential value of health promotion to the organization?
3. What are the leadership styles, pressures, strengths and weaknesses of your senior level executives?

The other important elements include:

- Creating cohesive wellness teams
- Collecting data to drive health efforts
- Crafting a wellness operating plan
- Choosing appropriate interventions
- Creating supportive environments
- Consistently evaluating outcomes.

There is a need for evaluative assessments of well-being in the workplace to consider the different components that are distinct, yet related, simultaneously, both from a root cause as well as a descriptive point of view. Good health is an imperative for improved productivity and national economic success. Health and wellbeing is not just a question of resource distribution, but is also linked to the physical and social organization of economic production. Wellbeing and health should be regarded as an investment that builds your economic infrastructure.

Wellness at Work: Enhancing the Quality of our Working Lives - Part 3 by Dr. Dawn Hillier

The close ties to stress, optimum performance loss and the quality of working life to its social environment point toward the need for organizational interventions. Organizational interventions have three critical advantages over approaches that focus on individual treatment.

First, organizational interventions have a wider scope. They improve the quality of the work environment for a large number of people, in contrast with the individual focus of most work-related therapeutic interventions.

Second, organizational interventions are not solely oriented toward eliminating a problem; they are directed toward improving the effectiveness of the work setting. This quality of organizational interventions increases their duration because they are not an ongoing cost for an organization, but a means of furthering organizational goals of service provision or productivity.

Third, organizational interventions focus directly on the work environment rather than implicitly blaming the victims for experiencing problems. That is, they approach quality of working life as a management issue, and stress and burnout as an organizational problem, not as an individual failing. This perspective shifts responsibility for action to a more powerful sector with greater resources for effecting change in organizational life.

Recommendations

(1) Organizations should conduct a review of the general wellness of the organization; strengthening it to encourage individuals and managers to adopt a more responsible attitude towards wellness. This includes the preparedness of managers to support and enhance a wellness culture.

(2) Funds should be created to distribute grants for research into the social and health impact of wellness among employees and the organization to ensure that the information provided to the employees remains accurate and that organizational policy relating to wellness remains effective.

Dawn Hillier PhD

Wellness at work: Enhancing the quality of our working lives
D. HILLIER, F. FEWELL, W. CAAN, & V. SHEPHARD
International Review of Psychiatry, October 2005; 17(5): 419–431