

# Employee Health and Wellbeing – whose responsibility is it?

“Where does responsibility for employee health and wellbeing lie? Expectations on both sides are higher than ever. Employees expect their employer to back up the ‘people are our greatest asset’ rhetoric with tangible actions, quality services and support. In return, employers expect their people to engage with wellbeing programmes and take responsibility for looking after their health as best they can.”

Gillian Pillans, Report author.

# Executive Summary

“For me, the view of the importance of health and wellbeing, particularly mental health, has changed within organisations over the last few years. There’s a growing acceptance that it’s a good thing to do, from both a business and a human point of view.” **Catherine Kilfedder, Head of Wellbeing, BT**

- 1 Employee health and wellbeing – and the employer’s role in helping employees adopt and sustain a healthy lifestyle, and return to health after illness – has become a hot topic over recent years. This report considers the current state of health and wellbeing at work, the actions employers are taking, and the business reasons for investing in health and wellbeing.
- 2 Health is defined as ‘being free from illness or injury’, whereas wellbeing is much broader, bringing together physical, mental, and social health into a broader concept of ‘life satisfaction’. Current approaches to employee health and wellbeing are increasingly focused not just on helping ill staff get better but on proactive steps to prevent ill-health, educate employees and build resilience.
- 3 Many organisations are thinking more strategically about health and wellbeing, viewing it as an essential feature of their employee value proposition, employer brand and how they engage with the community. We found many organisations in transition, either revisiting the programmes they offer or developing a more coherent strategy.
- 4 The factors behind employers’ growing interest in this area include the following.
  - As economic conditions improve, organisations recognise that staff have taken the strain through the recession.
  - There is a growing body of evidence that investments in health and wellbeing are worthwhile.
  - Employees’ expectations, especially those of new generations joining the workforce, are higher.

- Demographic change, particularly the ageing workforce, is likely to put greater pressure on employers in future.
- Employers are filling gaps left by government’s failure to offer preventative services.
- They recognise that it’s the right thing to do.

It can be difficult to prove a financial return on investment in health and wellbeing, but we consider the body of evidence pointing to a positive impact on health outcomes, bottom-line measures and productivity.

- 5 We investigate the current state of health and wellbeing. Life expectancy continues to rise and workplaces are generally much safer and healthier than 30 years ago. However, the incidence of ‘lifestyle’ diseases such as cardio-vascular disease and diabetes is on the up. Mental health is also a major concern, being one of the top two reasons for absence from work.
  - In the UK alone, the direct cost of absence to employers is estimated at £17bn.
  - The estimated annual median cost of absence per employee is £595.
  - Presenteeism – being at work but unable to work productively due to ill health – is also rising, increasing the burden of cost on employers.
- 6 The features of an effective health and wellbeing strategy include the following.
  - A clearly defined strategy, linked to business objectives and outcomes.

“Companies that are in the more advanced stages of health and wellness tend to have more effective workforce plans as well. They often integrate health and talent strategy – recognising that they are two sides of the same coin.” **Wolfgang Seidl, Partner and Head of Health Management Consulting, Mercer**

- A coherent set of evidence-based actions, rather than gimmicks or ‘random acts of wellness’.
- Activities reflect the specific demographic profile and health needs of the workforce.
- A focus on prevention of disease, as well as support for those who fall ill.
- Activities designed to support long-term lifestyle and behaviour change in unhealthy populations.
- A robust approach to communications, so employees know what services are available and are encouraged to use them.
- Proper evaluation of outcomes.

Through exploring examples and case studies, we look at how various organisations have applied these principles in practice, and what specific actions they have taken.

- 7 We find that the best employers do not just spend money on high-quality health and wellbeing services; they also focus on developing a ‘culture of health’, which is characterised by
- senior leaders and line managers who are engaged in and committed to the health and wellbeing of their staff
  - a work environment that promotes good-quality work, gives people sufficient control over their work and builds a physical environment that’s conducive to health
  - open, honest communications, particularly around ‘taboo’ subjects such as mental health.

- 8 We consider why interest in ‘resilience’ has grown of late and how organisations can develop it in the workforce. We also explore the growing popularity of mindfulness and positive psychology, and look at what sleep research tells us. We consider how organisations can apply these concepts to improve the wellbeing of their employees.
- 9 We conclude that ultimate responsibility for health and wellbeing lies with individuals themselves, but employers are playing a greater role in creating healthy environments, helping their people to make good lifestyle choices and providing support where it’s needed.

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