



DIVERSITY, INCLUSIVITY AND WELLBEING COMMUNITY EVENT: WELLBEING WASHING

CRF's Diversity, Inclusivity and Wellbeing Community came together to discuss "wellbeing washing" and to discuss strategies for tackling it. This summary shares some of the key insights from the discussion.



WHAT IS WELLBEING WASHING?

"Wellbeing washing" is when businesses publicly advocate for employee wellbeing and good mental health support without backing it up with tangible benefits for their workforce. In other words, all talk, no action. The concept is encapsulated in the following quote from Sir Simon Wessely, President of the Royal Society of Medicine, in the British Medical Journal: "Every time we have a mental health awareness week my spirits sink. We don't need people to be more aware. We can't deal with the ones who already are aware."

Research suggests anything between one in three and half of all employers are guilty of wellbeing washing. Seven in 10 workplaces publicly acknowledge mental health awareness days but this is twice the number of companies that provide any support. And just a third of organisations' mental health support was deemed 'good' or 'outstanding' by their employees.

Looking at the wider working context, data from the UK's Office of National Statistics shows that economic inactivity due to long-term sickness has increased since 2019.

- Mental illness up by **22%**
- Back or neck related disabilities or problems up by **31%**
- Other health problems or disabilities up by **40%**

We also know from CRF research that co-morbidities are very common. For example, nearly half of people with coronary heart disease also suffer from poor mental health. CRF research has concluded that companies need to develop a multidimensional approach to wellbeing, i.e. a larger programme of organisation self-care that takes a systematic approach to employee wellbeing.

The discussion explored some key themes around wellbeing washing:

- Well-intentioned but unclear outcomes: Many activities related to wellbeing, such as mental health awareness programs and mental health allies, are implemented with good intentions.

However, the desired outcomes are often unclear, and individuals rarely engage in meaningful conversations about mental health, leading to a potential mismatch between the solution and the problem it aims to address.

- Superficial solutions and distractions: While organisations may invest in various wellbeing initiatives like yoga classes, employee assistance programs (EAPs), and mindfulness activities, these efforts may not address the root causes of burnout or work overload. These superficial solutions can be seen as distractions from the actual issues that need to be resolved within the organisation, such as unrealistic workloads, understaffing or toxic cultures.
- Lack of accessibility and communication: There is a common challenge of employees not being aware of the wellbeing resources available to them or how to access them. Communication gaps and inadequate information dissemination hinder employees from utilising the support and solutions provided by the organisation. Improving accessibility and communication channels becomes crucial in ensuring employees can benefit from wellbeing initiatives.

Attendees shared examples of strategies and tactics they had found to be effective in addressing wellbeing washing and promoting overall wellbeing.

- **Leadership Style and Empathy:** Leaders who demonstrate empathy and openly discuss their own wellbeing contribute to addressing wellbeing washing. This involves leaders sharing their personal experiences and challenges and building time to discuss wellbeing into 1-2-1s and team meetings. Some organisations found having a designated executive sponsor to be an effective tactic.
- **Fostering a culture of openness and support:** a common barrier is that people only access company services and information when they reach crisis point. It's important to destigmatise mental ill health through open conversations and demonstrating empathy.
- Improving the availability of information on wellbeing services, for example clearly signposting intranet pages and information. Some organisations have wellbeing champions or ambassadors who promote wellbeing services alongside their day-to-day role and help raise awareness and provide feedback to the company.
- **Developing listening strategies:** One company launched a "Wellbeing Wall", an internal listening social media platform where people can anonymously post comments and concerns. Algorithms summarise the comments and sentiments and feed them back to HR and senior management. They have seen high levels of engagement from employees, especially in relation to the cost of living crisis. However, the challenge, as with such initiatives, is choosing what actions to take in response.



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- **Storytelling:** Attendees emphasised the power of storytelling in promoting wellbeing. Sharing personal stories and experiences reassures and connects people, making them feel understood and supported.
- **A Calendar of Events and Campaigns:** One speaker implemented a calendar of wellbeing events and ad campaigns to raise awareness. This strategy helps promote different aspects of wellbeing and highlights available resources and services. Low participation levels can be an issue, but some organisations found that having a senior executive lead such events can improve attendance and engagement.
- **Town Hall Takeover:** One attendee had experimented with "town hall takeovers," where senior leaders and partners share their stories and insights on specific wellbeing topics. This amplifies the voice of leadership and encourages engagement and participation from employees.
- **Working Groups and Focus Groups:** Some attendees had found working groups and focus groups to be effective in highlighting and addressing workload and stress-related issues. These groups aim to identify root causes and pinch points such as workload, job design, or relationships within teams and collaboratively find solutions to alleviate challenges. This approach involves creating a safe space for open discussions and actively involving employees in the decision-making process.
- **Addressing the root causes:** Sometimes the nature of work is the underlying issue. Ask whether your people have enough control and agency over their work, a clear sense of purpose to their work and feelings of job security. Do people feel empowered to push back when the demands of their role are unrealistic? If not, what can you do to address these concerns? One participant described how they make sure employees returning from long-term absence have the opportunity to discuss the factors within the organisation that contributed to their absence, so HR can identify common themes and work with leaders to address them.

To conclude the session, Gillian Pillans shared some key takeaways from CRF's research on employee health and wellbeing:

- Use data and evidence to inform decision-making and track progress in your well-being strategy.
- Collaborate closely with partners and service providers who have larger datasets and evidence bases to identify effective interventions and services.
- Segment different employee populations to address their specific well-being needs.
- Develop care pathways for common employee health issues based on data and expertise from healthcare providers and partners.

It's important to note that the effectiveness of wellbeing strategies may vary depending on the organisation and its specific context. Experimentation, customisation and use of data and evidence are key to finding the most effective approaches in addressing wellbeing washing and promoting overall wellbeing outcomes.

FURTHER READING

CRF. 2014. **Employee Health and Wellbeing – Whose Responsibility Is It?** Research Report. <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/employee-health-and-wellbeing-whose-responsibility-is-it-2>

CRF. 2020. **Let's Get (Beyond) Physical – Crafting a Multidimensional Approach to Employee Wellbeing.** Research Report. <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/research-report-lets-get-beyond-physical-creating-a-multidimensional-approach-to-employee-wellbeing>

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The next Diversity, Inclusivity and Wellbeing Community event will take place online on

Tuesday 26th September 2023, 12.00pm

Register your attendance [here](#). Also please get in [touch](#) with any topics that you would like to discuss and feature at a future session.

If you have any further questions or comments, please contact **Research Director, Gillian Pillans** gillian@crforum.co.uk

These community event summary notes were prepared by **Research Director, Gillian Pillans**.