Workforce Wellbeing in a Post-Pandemic World

Key considerations for HR leaders
When workforce wellbeing programs work, everyone wins. Employees are healthier and happier, leaders hold on to their top talent, and businesses maintain their competitive edge. But knowing what your employees need — and how to help them be their best selves — is no easy task given the unprecedented pandemic-related pressures and changes everyone is facing.

What does employee wellbeing look like in a post-pandemic world? Before you develop or implement any changes to your corporate wellbeing programs, it might help to understand how your employees’ mental and physical health may have been affected by the global pandemic.

**Mental health issues have reached the breaking point**

As a result of learnings from its Stress in America™ survey, the American Psychological Association declared a national mental health crisis that could yield serious health and social consequences for years to come. The study revealed that a whopping 67% of adults have experienced increased stress levels during the pandemic.

Among working adults, 68% reported that their employment experience has been negatively impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, citing factors including stress and anxiety from trying to balance household responsibilities during work time, decreased productivity, and fears of losing employment.
Physical health is suffering, too

Stress, anxiety, and emotional pressures brought on by the pandemic have physical manifestations as well. The 2021 Working Americans’ State of Physical Wellbeing Report revealed that many employees have experienced an onset or worsening of insomnia, fatigue, and a lack of energy since the start of the pandemic.

In fact, a significant percentage of employees have adopted stress-related habits that are negatively affecting their physical health:

- **46%** Decreased physical exercise
- **48%** Increased consumption of salty, sweet, or fatty foods
- **50%** Increased video/TV watching
- **25%** Increased use of alcohol or drugs

The report also showed that employees are sitting more often and for longer periods of time than they did prior to the pandemic. 49% reported being more sedentary (i.e., seated all day) on the job — compared with only 10% that reported being more active.
Mental and physical health are inextricably linked

Experts have long talked up the importance of physical activity for emotional wellbeing, given that being active releases chemicals in the brain that can help people boost their self-esteem, improve concentration, reduce insomnia, and feel better overall.

A study published in the Lancet Psychiatry Journal confirmed that the relationship between body and mind is reciprocal. People who exercised reported having 1½ fewer “bad days” per month than those who didn’t, showing that the more physically active one is, the more emotional wellbeing can improve.

But the relationship between physical and mental health goes deeper than that. BMC Medicine recently published a study of over 150,000 participants, conducted over seven years, that tracked the long-term effect of physical activity on mental health. In it, they found participants in the lowest fitness group were nearly twice as likely to experience depression and just over 1.5X as likely to experience anxiety, compared to those who exercised more regularly.

Meanwhile, research from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill highlights how regular physical activity can profoundly affect stress levels, with people experiencing lower levels of stress hormones like cortisol and epinephrine after bouts of physical activity—leading to improved moods and lifting anxiety. As The Mayo Clinic sums up, “Virtually any form of exercise, from aerobics to yoga, can act as a stress reliever.”

Participants in the lowest fitness group were nearly 2x as likely to experience depression.
Workforce wellbeing programs that work

The pandemic has brought forth profound changes in where people work, how they work, and what they want from their professional and personal lives. More employees are prioritizing work-life balance over a comfortable salary and now expect their employer to support their mental and physical health and wellbeing. As a result, 78% of benefits professionals see employee wellbeing as a higher priority than in previous years.

At the same time, a survey by Willis Towers Watson found that only 29% of employers feel that their wellbeing programs have been effective at supporting employees during the pandemic.

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Doubling down on mental health

While burnout, anxiety, and depression have long been significant workplace concerns, the pandemic has shined a light on the need for organizations to consider doing more of the following:

- Remove any stigma surrounding mental health by letting employees know that it’s okay to not always feel okay. One way to do this is for leaders to share their personal struggles and talk about any mental health services that they or their family members are using.
- Train managers to spot the signs of distress in their employees, and make sure they’re aware of all the services your organization offers.
- Build mental health days into the company’s PTO policy, or even make it mandatory that employees take time off.
- Put in place a variety of offerings that account for the different ways people can engage with resources based on their personal preferences. Examples include:
  - Virtual emotional support coaching and therapy sessions for employees and family members
  - Online communities for workers to chat with one another about their stress
  - Mobile apps that provide 24/7 on-demand access to coaching, therapy, psychiatry, and other helpful content
  - Wearables and other technologies that can help with sleep and stress reduction
Extending in-office benefits to remote workers

SHRM\textsuperscript{11} research from February 2021 showed that 52\% of employed Americans would choose to work from home permanently if given the option, and 35\% would take a salary reduction to do so. However, remote employees cite the lack of separation between work-life and home-life, as well decreased access to a gym or health club, as key barriers to maintaining their health.

Here are a few ways employers can meet the needs of a distributed workforce:

1. **Offer reimbursements:**
   Whether for home exercise equipment, ergonomic desks and chairs, computer monitors or other at-home fitness benefits to employees who are now working remotely. Remember, they may no longer be able to take advantage of in-office fitness facilities or discounts to nearby gyms.

2. **Build community:**
   A study by the Journal of the American Osteopathic Association\textsuperscript{12} revealed that people who participate in group exercise versus independent exercise had a 26\% reduction in stress and "significantly improved" their quality of life. Find out if any employees are certified personal trainers, or yoga instructors and would be willing to teach classes or become wellbeing advocates for the organization. Challenges are another great way to encourage participation. Walking challenges, for example, are easy to implement and appeal to workers who want to get in their steps but have become more sedentary since working from home.

3. **Supporting healthy eating:**
   With the rise of decentralized workforces across industries, flexibility is key when it comes to supporting time-starved employees who want to eat well. If your organization previously provided free meals or healthy snacks to office workers, consider having meals delivered to remote employees once per week or on company-wide meeting days.

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Support the wellbeing of a distributed workforce

Workforce wellbeing is not a new concept, and many organizations have had programs in place since long before the pandemic began. However, the unsustainable stress and constant changes of the last year have left employees at the end of their rope — and in need of more support from HR leaders.

Now more than ever, supporting the diverse needs of an increasingly distributed workforce means not only developing comprehensive mental and physical programs that are accessible from anywhere, but also making sure employees are aware of these programs and know to engage with them when needed. Once they’re engaged, listen to learn which programs are resonating, which are not, and what to consider developing in the future.

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