



## Strategic HR Review

The impact of employees' wellbeing on performance in the workplace  
Janice Haddon,

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A person's performance and productivity in the workplace is strongly linked to their overall health and wellbeing, so investing in and taking care of the welfare of its staff should be at the heart of an organisation's culture and values.

The world of work has evolved past just looking after the 'traditional' health and safety of employees to one where total wellbeing is fundamental. Employment law not only protects employees from harassment and unfair dismissal, but also covers stress and unfair treatment. A mental health condition which has a long-term effect on a person's normal day-to-day activity is considered a disability. Crucially for businesses, under employment law there is no upper compensation limit for employees under disability discrimination law, so organisations do need to take it seriously.

Many organisations pay attention to their employees' physical health, with offers of gym memberships, cycle to work and car sharing schemes encouraging them to get active, and healthy food and drink options in their cafes or canteens offering better nutritionally balanced choices.

We are all well versed in the benefits of physical exercise. Yet with an ever increasing number of career demands, more and more of us are spending a larger majority of our working day sedentary. Figures from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) show that, on average, people in the UK now spend around 31 hours a week in work (33 if you work in London). That average includes part-time and full-time workers and is the highest figure recorded since 2008.

So encouraging employees to take a break, even if just a quick walk at a lunchtime, is becoming an important task for organisations to highlight the need for regular physical exercise. But without continuous emphasis, the above types of health and nutritional benefits can be short lived. Encouragement and promotion of the benefits are fundamental to maintain people's interest. Some will take up the options but others won't if they feel they do not have the time or the pressures of work are too great. We only have to consider how many people take up gym memberships in January of their own accord, for them to then fizzle out within a few weeks or months to see evidence of this.

As well as lowering the risk of illnesses such as heart disease and cancer, taking part in regular physical activity can also help to lower the risk of depression by up to 30 per cent, according to the NHS. Employee health and wellbeing requires a full 360 approach, i.e. physical, mental and nutritional. Despite the need for an emphasis on physical and nutritional wellbeing, mental health is one of the core foundations of a person's performance, yet this is often ignored.

The Mental Health Foundation estimates that 3 in 10 employees will experience a mental health problem in any one year, so organisations must take action to prioritise mental wellbeing. Research has shown that around a quarter of people leave their job because they feel 'burnt out'. With so much of our time, and indeed lives, spent in work, it is not surprising then that so many people are left struggling due to work pressures.

We all experience pressure every day, but it is when we exceed our personal capacity to cope that this pressure can tip into fully blown stress. Stress can have a huge effect on a person's state of wellbeing; manifesting itself in a range of symptoms, from **cognitive**, including a lack of concentration, anxiousness, a loss of objectivity and trouble thinking clearly, to **emotional**, such as a moodiness, becoming short tempered, feeling tense, loneliness and the inability to relax.

There are also **physical** manifestations including headaches, muscle tension, insomnia, weight problems, frequent colds and chest pain. In order to deal with these symptoms, sufferers may develop a number of negative **behavioural** patterns, which they use to cope. There may be a growing dependence on chemicals, from drugs and alcohol to smoking and caffeine, as well as a tendency to overeat.

People suffering from stress may also display changes in their eating habits and have trouble sleeping. There can also be changes in their relationships with others. In certain situations, sufferers may find themselves over-reacting or prone to emotional outbursts, sometimes picking fights with friends, family or co-workers in situations they would not have previously. Alternatively, people suffering with stress can also isolate themselves from others, either because they believe being alone can help to reduce stress or because the thought of being in a social situation causes them anxiety.

These symptoms can not only have a damaging impact on the sufferer themselves but also on the people around them. For those suffering stress-related symptoms in the workplace, productivity can suffer hugely. In many cases for those suffering from stress, communication and decision-making deteriorates, irritability increases and the ability to work as part of a team decreases, causing fracture and a lack of performance as a whole.

For many people, feeling under pressure in work can stem from a lack of understanding of what is expected of them. Without clear instruction or direction, a person cannot be expected to carry out their job effectively and so be productive. It is important that employers are open with employees from the beginning and provide a clear, defined job description. In addition, to achieve top performance, individuals need to have the right skills and experience for their role, relevant training and development opportunities and the support of their team and management.

Effective people management is critical. Investors in People (IIP)'s annual Job Exodus Survey 2018, which polled 1,000 employed people and 1,000 unemployed people, found that 47 per cent of UK employees are planning to look for a new job this year, with 49 per cent of those admitting poor management was the main reason behind the desired move. Good management is not only key to retaining staff, but also to motivating staff to achieve the best results, thereby increasing productivity and performance. In fact, research has shown that those companies in the FTSE 100 which prioritise employee engagement outperform the rest by 10 per cent.

However, not only does good management help to increase staff engagement and motivation, working with your employees can also help to reduce work-related stress. Often, excessive pressure in the workplace is caused by factors affecting a person's job role

or other situations within the workplace, such as a negative relationship with a colleague(s) or client. While this can be enough to cause stress alone, these pressures can be exacerbated by the desire to hide symptoms and carry on 'as normal'. When struggling with some or all of the symptoms previously outlined above, maintaining this façade can have a huge impact on an employee's already fragile wellbeing.

Employers should encourage and facilitate open and honest two-way communication with their employees. Keeping staff up to date and involved with key business decisions makes them feel valued, immediately increasing their desire to perform well in their role. By listening to your staff and taking their comments and opinions on board you can also work together to develop something that works, on balance, for everyone.

By creating these open communication channels, employees will also feel able to discuss any issues they may be having which may be having an impact on their performance in the workplace. Without these open communication channels, people may attempt to brush off their struggles and carry on as normal, which, as I've previously outlined, merely serves to heighten the issue.

Some organisations offer benefits like on-site massages and yoga classes to support relaxation, but most don't tackle mental health head on for fear of opening a can of worms and facilitating claims of workplace-related stress from employees.

As the saying goes, a problem shared is a problem halved. In an organisation with a good workplace culture, this can increase ten-fold. If a team is actively encouraged to work together and respect each other, then in instances when an employee does open up about any issues they may be having, others in the team will usually rally around to help share the load. To be supported thus will have a huge impact on not only the wellbeing of the person involved but also on the relationship between team members, thereby hopefully avoiding the potential fracture and lack of performance outlined earlier.

However, there are also positive ways in which employers can empower their staff to nurture and maintain their own personal health, wellbeing and work/life balance by providing them with the relevant skills and tools, on an ongoing basis. This can be done through Lunch and Learn sessions, workshops and coaching support, carried out on a regular basis.

Organisations need to show a true commitment to employee wellbeing and work/life balance through the implementation of a fully defined policy. Not only will this give organisations the momentum they need to keep health and wellbeing at the core of their values and culture, but for employees, knowledge really is key. For many, when they are introduced to the right information and understand how to establish their own sustainable goals, they will create new and healthy habits to replace old, negative patterns.