

Employee wellbeing: is it at the top of your agenda?

In an economic downturn, ensuring the health and wellbeing of your staff is more important than ever. Yet in a bid to cut costs, some organisations may choose to axe some initiatives. **Lucie Mitchell** discovers that this is the last thing you should be doing

We are not experiencing good times at the moment. The recession means that redundancies, and therefore workloads, are on the increase, which means that stress and anxiety levels could be going through the roof. And when that happens, businesses start to see a loss of productivity and motivation among staff, which in turn affects the bottom line.

This goes to show that employee health and wellbeing really should be of paramount importance to HR departments right now – and the proof is in the pudding. Global research at the end of last year, by HR and benefits consulting firm Buck Consultants, revealed that workplace wellness strategies are rapidly growing in popularity across the globe. In Europe, the number of organisations that have implemented a wellbeing programme has doubled to 40 per cent in the last year, the survey found.

Plus, in this year's Sunday Times Best Companies list, 95 per cent of organisations in the top 20 big firms have a wellbeing programme in place, as well as 88 per cent of medium-sized companies.

Keeping staff healthy in this current climate is really important, says Oliver Gray, MD of energiseYou, a provider of wellbeing services to the UK's corporate sector. 'At the moment, people have to work even harder because many companies are going through redundancies and there are less people doing more work – so productivity is really important, which is helped by having healthy staff,' he adds.

Mark Winwood, director of psychological services at employee wellbeing and assistance company AXA ICAS, agrees and adds that after a redundancy exercise, the health and wellbeing of the people who remain is more important than ever before because they would be missed twice as much if they were to become unwell.

He also points to survivor guilt: 'Their anxiety levels will rise because when they see their colleagues being made redundant, they have anxiety about the safety of their own role, but then they feel guilty about having those anxieties because they've still got their job. The next thing is that the work

that their redundant colleagues were doing will be loaded onto their workload and they start feeling resentment.'

Wellbeing doesn't have to cost the earth

Of course, in an economic downturn, businesses will be looking to cut costs as much as possible, but don't make wellbeing one of the strategies to face the chop – in fact, there are numerous initiatives that you can put in place that don't have to cost much at all.

'One of the easiest things to do is a workstation assessment,' advises Gray. 'Many people go to work and sit in front of their computer and then don't move all day, so many health problems are caused because people are not set up correctly at their workstation. They don't know about taking regular breaks, or their posture is bad at their desk. That is a really simple and cost-effective thing for employers to set up.'

Other options include subsidised gym membership for staff; exercise classes such as yoga; massage; flu jabs towards the end of the year; and health screening.

One organisation that appears to have got it right is Instant Offices, a provider of serviced offices and flexible office space, which won the 'best for wellbeing' award in this year's Sunday Times Best Small Companies to Work For list. Its sales and HR director, Patricia Bacon, explains the wellbeing initiatives on offer at the company: 'We provide free mineral water, fruit, cereal bars, herbal teas, breakfast cereals, and so on. Many people might say that that is standard but it provides people with that extra little bit, particularly in these recessionary times. We also have a daily tea trolley at 4pm, where a different member of staff brings round tea and biscuits each day.'

Other schemes they have implemented include corporate membership to a gym, free use of company bicycles, hypnosis for people who want to give up smoking, early finish on a Friday, football tournaments, charity fun runs, ski trips,





TODD DAVIDSON/GETTY

sabbaticals, and a duvet morning on an employee's birthday.

'We also have an away day every six months, with a company update, and within that we do a straw poll to find out what people like and don't like. Our initiatives come out as a reaction to people telling us what they want, rather than a room of directors discussing it. It empowers people to have ideas,' remarks Bacon.

The results speak for themselves. Bacon says that there are very few sick days among staff and they have a seven to eight per cent staff turnover rate. She also remarks that the business continues to expand, with good revenues for the first quarter of this year. 'I firmly believe that staff are more engaged as a result of us implementing these initiatives, which has a positive effect on what they are bringing into the business and therefore the bottom line.'

The key to success

So, the benefits of wellbeing initiatives are plain to see. But how do you ensure they are a success? 'For HR, the key part is communication,' says Gray. 'The company must get behind it and communicate it well. When a CEO puts his or her name to it, that can make a big difference.'

Case study: Health and wellbeing at First ScotRail

The health and wellbeing programme at First ScotRail demonstrates commitment to staff and recognises the relationship between staff wellbeing and customer service levels. *Becky Midgley* talks to its occupational health advisor to find out more about the company's wellbeing initiatives

First ScotRail is the largest regional train operating company in the UK and serves 81 million passenger journeys a year. Over the past four years it has been developing its award-winning people strategy with the assistance of key stakeholders and four trade unions. In the process, the business has recognised the value in improving employee engagement and wellbeing.

When FirstGroup took over the franchise in October 2004 there were two major impacting factors on the culture and wellbeing of their workforce: 'We have an 80 per cent majority male workforce, which has led to the embedded "macho" culture that doesn't take health and health promotion too seriously,' admits Nicola Macpherson, occupational health advisor at First ScotRail. 'Our two main reasons for sickness absence were musculoskeletal and mental health problems. We set out to address these issues initially as they were obviously the biggest issues to our workforce.'

Macpherson stresses the importance of a good work-life balance: 'Most of our employees are shift workers so we set out to address striking a good work-life balance by bringing as much help and support regarding positive wellbeing to the workforce, to make it more accessible to our employees.'

'Our workforce is ageing and we have a large majority of staff who are with us from school leaving until retirement, which is evident in the very low staff turnover we have. We also have a lot of families working within our company. We therefore set out to address the issues of poor lifestyle choices within the family setting as well as the work setting.' Many employees cited shift work as a reason for poor lifestyle choices.

The way forward

In response to the findings gathered over the last four years, First ScotRail decided that a multi-pronged approach was the only way forward: 'We brought on board a team of physiotherapists throughout our route who had a specific focus on occupational physiotherapy, which involves them assessing our various jobs and locations and incorporating their treatment into their normal daily duties as much as possible,' explains Macpherson.

'We redirected our Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) to one that used a person-centred approach using cognitive behavioural therapy as appropriate, and extended this to family members.'

The firm also used the services of on-site massage and chiropody for its employees, as well as hypnotherapy for smoking cessation. 'We also set up a personal health challenge using a personal trainer who developed a fitness assessment and improvement plan for all employees who took part in the campaign,' she says.

When asked how they went about implementing their new-found strategy, Macpherson reflected on the trend of employees spending their 'whole working careers' with First ScotRail and the

Winwood echoes these points: 'With anything like this, people get very anxious about the unknown and it is very important to face these difficult conversations head on. One thing that I would always recommend is, if you have got any budget whatsoever for any development, is to train your managers in how to break bad news and communicate effectively.'

Also, HR must measure the impact of the service they are providing, in terms of what employees think about it and what the benefits are. 'The key challenge is first of all getting the budget agreed to do it and then demonstrating that the budget was well spent,' comments Gray. 'So it is very much about gaining employee feedback, measuring factors such as staff engagement, satisfaction and absence. I think that is probably the weakest issue out there at the moment – there are many companies implementing employee wellbeing programmes, but not enough measurement going on to demonstrate the benefits of them.'

It is also important for employers to take action if stress levels are rising among the workforce. There is no doubt that, due to the economy, the working environment can become more stressful and this must be recognised.

‘HR must feel confident pushing employee wellbeing forward, not because it is a nice, fluffy thing, but because it can actually help the profits in the business’

'Employers have really got to take a proactive approach to keeping staff happy, motivated and healthy during these times, otherwise there is going to be a lot more burn out and staff absence,' warns Gray. 'If people are unhappy, they will leave and go to an organisation where they look after their staff better – so it is also about staying ahead of the competition.'

It is clear that wellbeing initiatives are not just a 'nice' thing to do for staff, they can actually make a financial impact to the bottom line, as Gray concludes: 'HR must feel confident pushing employee wellbeing forward, not because it is a nice, fluffy thing, but because it can actually help the profits in the business.' ■

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need for a person-centred approach.

'We have put in place support and proactive wellbeing campaigns to ensure our staff can achieve as healthy a work-life balance as they wish to. This helps staff access health services promptly – helping them as well as us. This was crucial in helping our staff be fit and well at work and at home.'

The company's EAP began to focus on person-centred counselling in order to assist staff in finding supported solutions to any health problems or concerns.

'It also meant that they had a tool kit to help them deal with any future situations,' comments Macpherson. 'In helping deal with general lifestyle issues, we launched "wellbeing weeks" across our route with a general weekly theme and a specific theme within that topic for each day. For example, a healthy eating-themed week had a day dedicated to easy exercise, packing a healthy lunch, feeding the family healthily etc.'

'We also realised that shift working makes life outside work more difficult. So we use the services of on-site massage therapists and chiropodists, offered to staff free during wellbeing week campaigns and at a very reduced rate throughout the rest of the year.'

Positive results

The results are clear: absence rates are down from 6.9 per cent to 4.1 per cent; and increased employee engagement with staff survey response rates doubled to 44 per cent. A revitalised recruitment campaign has attracted 80,000 applications and another campaign to help address the lack of female workers has increased

applications by 10 per cent.

Furthermore, smoking cessation has to date had a 70 per cent success rate and is being rolled out next year with a view to offering hypnotherapy for other health needs, adds Macpherson.

'Our personal health challenge showed a marked improvement in fitness, and was so popular we are looking to bring something in-house as part of our next stage of wellbeing promotion.'

Overall, the company has made an annual saving on sickness absence of £2m, which Macpherson duly notes 'is obviously important in any financial climate but especially in today's.'

First ScotRail has signed up for the Healthy Working Lives scheme and has already achieved a bronze standard and should continue to achieve its silver, having ascertained that its health and wellbeing campaign is relevant to employees.

The company's wellbeing initiatives were also acknowledged when it won the Employers Forum on Age (EFA) award for health and wellbeing in February. The award recognises employers that are serious about addressing the health issues of an ageing workforce.

Reflecting on the EFA win, Macpherson concludes: 'We are totally committed to employing people of all ages. As a business we are growing and we are very aware of increasing diversity needs which we dynamically address. We have apprentice schemes, a good family-friendly policy, and a whole host of employee benefits as part of our employee benefits scheme. To be recognised by the EFA for our efforts is magnificent.'

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