

# Innovate or stagnate

**Richard Hopkins** discusses the evolving approach to employee wellness and the role of employee assistance (EA) professionals

The need for an integrated approach to the provision of wellness support services for employees is increasingly hard to ignore. Wellness embraces not only employees' physical and mental health and wellbeing but also behaviour in the workplace.

Most organisations currently go some way to meeting their employees' wellness needs or, more accurately, what they see as their needs. With a few major exceptions, they provide a series of largely disconnected, ongoing programmes and short-lived initiatives which focus on fixing problems rather than on establishing comprehensive and sustainable wellness. These initiatives are almost always managed by different people from different departments. There's a lack of central accountability and of a coordinated message, resulting in employee confusion or, worse still, indifference. The wellness support provided is adjacent rather than integral to the core values and vision of these organisations. This way of doing business is fragmented and costly. It need not be.

The integrated approach, being adopted by some more cutting-edge organisations, provides a link between employee wellness and the organisation's core values. Typically, such an approach is owned equally by management and staff. It delivers cost savings and a higher return on investment (ROI). It provides a seamless response to employees' physical and mental health and wellbeing needs. It builds and sustains resilience. It increases engagement and connects into talent management and retention. It encourages more innovation and greater creativity. It enhances performance, increases productivity, improves employee health, keeps more employees at work and reduces presenteeism. It creates a user-friendly, supportive environment which also helps attract higher calibre people who want to work in a safe environment and where their contribution is valued. It gives responsibility for initiation, implementation, evaluation and development to one central, coordinating resource, accountable to top management.

If such an approach has so many positive benefits, then why do:

- So many organisations persist with a fragmented approach?
- Employers fail to link wellness to business strategy?
- Few organisations provide their staff with training, coaching and mentoring in the skills they need to take ownership of their own health and wellbeing?
- Occupational Health practitioners find themselves adjacent to the organisation, rather than at its core?
- Health and Safety people have so little to do with absenteeism management?
- Line managers find it difficult to discuss the real reason why one of their staff failed to turn up yesterday?
- Most wellness initiatives singularly fail to engage with 100 per cent of employees?
- Employers assume employees will see the need to care for themselves, rather than incentivising them to do so?
- So few employees show any interest in health and wellbeing events?
- Organisations fail to integrate their employee assistance programme (EAP) into their broader performance management strategies?

## The increasing cost of unhealthy employees

Report after report shows the increasing cost inefficiencies of an unhealthy workforce. Poor wellness has a negative impact on employees, on their morale, their performance and on the performance of the organisation. Poor absenteeism management, and even more important, the growth of presenteeism, drain an organisation of its energy and vitality. The cost of absenteeism is rarely linked to line manager performance. Too often, once an employee is absent for more than a few days, he or she quickly becomes out-of-sight and out-of-mind and very soon somebody else's problem.

Research shows how widespread presenteeism has become. It now costs UK businesses at least as much, if not twice as much, as absenteeism<sup>1</sup>. As long ago as 2004, the

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For illustration purposes only – posed by models

## *'Report after report shows the increasing inefficiencies of an unhealthy workforce'*

Harvard Business Review reported that presenteeism accounted for 62 per cent of productivity losses in the USA<sup>2</sup>. Today, in the UK, so little is still understood about its causes, its costs and how to reduce them.

Recent data shows that more employees are now turning up for work when they are ill. They cite workload, job security and workplace culture as the main reasons for doing so<sup>3</sup>. Few managers track how often a member of their staff turns up to work with contagious flu or an infectious cough and cold. Even fewer measure the impact this has on individual behaviour and the associated operational costs involved? Seventy-five per cent of organisations do not encourage their staff to talk openly about the mental health problems they are experiencing<sup>4</sup>. A management culture which leads employees to come in to work, through fear of losing their job, however ill they feel, is hardly consistent with being an employer of choice.

### **What is an integrated wellness policy?**

There are several ways of patching together the various wellness strands within an organisation that can go some way to creating a more joined-up organisational response to employees' needs. The majority of employers do provide a mixture of several different health and wellbeing initiatives or benefits<sup>5</sup>. Uncoordinated, though, these are likely to amount to little more than sticking plaster. A fully integrated policy combines all the organisational activities which impact on individual and organisational wellness and directly links them to the organisation's core values. These vary but typically relate to the underlying business principles and belief systems of the organisation such as integrity, honesty, care, excellence, quality, leadership, and service. An integrated policy enables employees to own and manage their own wellness. This, in turn, leads to a greater sense of personal reward and wellbeing, enhancing both employee performance and that of the organisation. It builds on existing values and activities to create a new and sustainable culture of wellness.

### **Implementing an integrated wellness strategy**

Such a policy involves a major change in mindset and in organisational behaviour which takes time to achieve. Top management commitment is critical and is usually born out of the realisation that the way things are being done is no longer the best way, and that it is no longer an option to ignore the business and workplace costs of inaction. Implicit in this is the

recognition that the organisation cannot continue to outperform its past and meet the competitive challenges it faces when its employees remain unwell.

A hero on the board is essential to drive the development of the policy, its strategy, implementation and evaluation. A strong business case, based on both qualitative and quantitative measures, is required and needs to be expressed in terms the board understands.

An organisation typically has a well established and clearly defined financial policy, delivered by experienced and respected management resources with senior management endorsement. Finance flows through the organisation encompassing every aspect of its activity. Every line manager has a responsibility to manage its impact on his or her own area of responsibility. Every organisation has someone responsible for finance on its board. By developing a similar positioning, the same can also be achieved for wellness.

A phased introduction of a new wellness policy is likely to enable the organisation to grow into its requirements. The medium to long-term aim is to put wellness at the heart of the organisation so that it becomes an integral part of business performance, impacting on every organisational activity and camping permanently in the mindset of all employees.

The planning process involves assessing and establishing the wellness needs of employees and matching them to those of the organisation to achieve convergence. A review of existing support policies and initiatives is required to determine their relevance and levels of interaction. Common quality standards will need to be developed to achieve consistent application, ensuring that change happens at the same time across the organisation. The resources to implement the policy will need to be determined and any gaps in key competencies identified and met.

### **Stakeholder ownership**

Planning also includes consultation throughout the organisation to achieve buy-in and ownership by all stakeholders. The policy will need to link into other key organisational policies and its cost fully integrated into existing financial systems. New roles and responsibilities will need to be clearly defined and adopted by all those involved, including an ongoing commitment by senior and middle management to provide proactive and visible support for the new wellness culture. Once the policy has been agreed, a series of



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implementation proposals will be needed for further consultation. This helps achieve employee ownership of the implementation process and content, reducing the fear of change, increasing involvement and engagement with the new culture and enhancing the sense of being valued.

#### **Easily measurable outcomes**

Outcome criteria need to be linked into the organisation's cultural and performance goals and, as far as possible, fit into existing organisational norms. Regular monitoring and evaluation against readily measurable outcome targets is required and action taken to ensure that both employees' and organisational goals continue to be met. Ongoing and transparent feedback to all employees is critical to retain full stakeholder buy-in over time.

As a result, the policy becomes a core and sustainable part of organisational culture. It is likely to bring together a wide range of activities including ongoing wellness training, education, coaching and mentoring for management and staff; wellness-related performance targets for all levels of management; on/offsite wellness activities; regular communications on a variety of wellness-related issues using existing communication channels as well as interactive online and social networking media; individual health management plans; regular health risk assessments; wellness peer support groups; and assessments of the impact of home life on performance at work. The policy also impacts on the management of benefits packages, canteen menus, flexible working arrangements, occupational health, health and safety, absenteeism, presenteeism, pressure, user-friendly disability, diversity and equal opportunities, environmental risk and behavioural change.

#### **Barriers to integrated wellness**

A major barrier is likely to be top management's reluctance to recognise that the status quo is inefficient in both human and financial terms. The organisational changes required to create a new wellness mindset, though admirable and ideal, would not typically be considered a priority until, of course, there's a crisis which exposes the risks inherent in maintaining the status quo. The resources and skills required for change would not be seen as being readily available. There would be risks involved in changing the focus of existing activities and areas of responsibility, based on narrow departmental territories, to one which focuses more broadly on employee and organisational needs. Integration and coordination could

well be seen as creating an inflexible, centralised bureaucracy cutting across established communication channels and running the risk of losing existing best practice. Employees would also need to be persuaded of the benefits of the change and of the personally rewarding nature of the new culture, seeing it as a positive contribution to their workplace and not an unwarranted and irrelevant intrusion into their personal lives.

#### **EA professionals have a pivotal role to play in an integrated wellness policy. Are they up to the challenge?**

EA professionals are in a unique position. They are the only people who have the knowledge, skills and depth of experience of employee behaviour to turn it into improved performance. They have detached objectivity combined with an insider's knowledge of the emotional lives of employees. They, more than any, are acutely aware of the interaction between work and life and the impact personal issues have on performance in the workplace.

The EA market in the UK is an increasingly mature one with a dozen or so external providers delivering traditional EA services (confidential counselling, performance management advice and crisis support) whilst fighting each other on price.

There are, however, sufficient indications for hope as a few have recognised the opportunities market maturity brings and are carving out for themselves a competitive advantage by using their consultancy skills to deliver services which meet the broader requirements of an integrated wellness culture.

#### **Responding to the challenge**

By rising to the challenge and providing leadership in such developments, EA professionals can reinforce their position as the core advisory resource on emotional wellbeing, extending it to include broader wellness issues for both employees and management. They have the opportunity to play a central role in the evolving integrated approach to employee wellness. To achieve this, they will need to review their own business development strategies. This involves re-positioning themselves as more broadly based consultants dealing with organisational solutions which are well beyond their current, more narrowly focused role of solving the emotional problems of poorly performing employees.

To achieve this, EA professionals will need to broaden

their skills base to include wider wellness consultancy skills as well as working in partnership with other consultancies with complementary skills. They will need to find ways of moving out from behind their cloak of confidentiality to become trusted advisors to their customers. Building trust up the organisation requires innovative initiatives, outside the traditional terms of reference for EA work.

These could include:

- Embracing the opportunities provided by interactive electronic media, including e-learning and webinars, to become the first-line wellness resource for all employees and management
- Providing advice and solutions for reducing the incidence and cost of presenteeism
- Creating specialist support services for fast-track talent
- Coaching and mentoring management and employees on taking responsibility for their own wellness
- Providing information and advice on the impact of the current economic climate on working families and the workplace.

These and other initiatives will enable EA professionals to reach out to managers well beyond their existing organisational contacts and establish their credibility as trusted wellness advisors.

*EA professionals have the option of either stagnating in the current status quo or of becoming a wider resource of first resort. They can remain in from the cold and add significant value to their customer organisations and to the lives of all their employees. In the process, they can also build a stronger, more rewarding and sustainable business base for themselves.*

#### References

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