HEALTH AND WELLBEING
AT WORK 2021

Implications and
recommendations for practitioners

Health and
Well-being

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The registered charity champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 150,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

Guide

Health and Wellbeing at Work: Implications and recommendations for practitioners

About the guide

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed people's working lives dramatically over the past year. The effects of lockdown, furloughing, redundancies, absenteeism and the huge swing towards homeworking have increased the demands on employees and exacerbated work-related stress.

This guide is based on the findings of our latest _Health and Wellbeing at Work survey,_ produced in partnership with Simplyhealth. It explores the challenges employees have faced since the crisis began, and outlines the practical steps organisations can take to support their mental health.

HR practitioners can use the guide to identify the main threats to wellbeing at work and formulate a systematic approach to improving conditions for employees as the pandemic continues to evolve.

Implications and recommendations

Don't underestimate the ongoing impact of COVID-19

This year's survey was conducted at the end of 2020, a year dominated by health and wellbeing concerns as a consequence of COVID-19. The virus and repeated lockdown restrictions have had a huge impact on people's physical and mental health. To protect their workforces, organisations have had to make rapid changes, including temporarily closing or reducing operations, changing working practices to ensure social distancing, and shifting to large-scale homeworking. These changes have created new work demands and routines for many people, further creating the potential for work-related stress.

The NHS's rollout of a national vaccination programme is a huge step forward in combating COVID-19. Going forward, effective vaccines will play a vital role in helping us to return to a working life that more closely resembles what we enjoyed before the pandemic. However, it's clear we will be living with this virus for the foreseeable future, and organisations need to continue with a holistic approach to protecting people from infection; for example, by maintaining wider COVID-secure working practices as well as making use of effective testing.

Recommendations
- Continue to take all reasonable steps to combat the risk of COVID-19 and provide a safe working environment; closely follow government guidance on _when_ and _how_ to facilitate a safe return to a physical workspace.
- Consider developing a vaccination policy to promote the importance of people having the vaccine. Highlight official advice to show its safety and effectiveness as part of a voluntary, and not mandatory, approach to vaccination.

- Develop a systematic approach to assessing the impact of working practices on people's health; for example, carry out regular ergonomic and psychological risk assessments for everyone, including homeworkers.
- Make sure line managers are equipped with the knowledge and skills to manage stress in their teams and support good mental health.

Look after yourself too
HR professionals have been at the centre of leading their organisation's response to COVID-19 and will now be bearing the weight of responsibility for people's wellbeing during a climate of recession and high unemployment. Do be mindful of the risks to your own wellbeing and seek support if needed. Check out our wellbeing offering for CIPD members.

Make sure wellbeing stays on the corporate agenda

It's heartening to see the heightened attention of senior leaders on this crucial agenda. Good leadership and people management practices form the foundations of a healthy workplace, and all organisations need to focus on these areas to make a sustainable difference to people's wellbeing.

Over the past few years we've reported slow but steady progress by organisations to adopt a holistic approach to health and wellbeing, and it's good to see this trend continuing. Most make efforts to promote mental health, 'good work', collective/social relationships, values/principles and physical health, for example. However, all wellbeing dimensions need concerted focus if organisations are to make a difference in preventing ill health and enhancing wellbeing, besides supporting people when they become unwell.

Recommendations
- Evaluate the impact of your organisation's health and wellbeing activity to encourage serious and visible commitment from the senior team. What difference does it make to employee attendance and engagement levels? Can you demonstrate impact in other areas, such as improved customer service?
- Build a strategic approach to ensure health and wellbeing priorities are integrated across the business. This will help to avoid the pitfall of having a 'menu' of activities that aren't joined up.
- Have a standalone strategy that sets out your organisation's priorities and the responsibilities of different groups, including HR, occupational health, managers and employees.
- Identify the main risks to people's health in your organisation so that your support and interventions are based on real employee need. What does your absence and occupational health data show? Can you analyse the results of stress risk assessments and employee surveys on wellbeing?
- Involve your people in developing a health and wellbeing programme. Does your organisation have a wellbeing champions group, made up of volunteers with the enthusiasm to help drive forward the agenda?

Tackle COVID-related stress

It's uplifting to see the high level of concern for people's mental health, considering the challenges many have faced since the onset of COVID-19. Encouragingly, the findings show that more organisations are stepping up their efforts to foster mentally healthy workplaces. However, half still think their efforts at tackling work-related stress aren't effective, suggesting that more organisations need to adopt a systematic approach to preventing and managing psychological risk.

Organisations need to identify the main threats to people's mental wellbeing; for example, by conducting stress risk audits and developing effective action plans to address them. Part

of this strategy must involve organisations equipping line managers with the knowledge and skills to manage stress in their teams and support good mental health. The aim should be to consider the health and wellbeing of the whole person, making sure employees are aware of the services and support available to them and how to access them. Also, it's crucial that organisations promote an open and inclusive working environment so that people feel confident about discussing a mental health issue and the challenges they are experiencing.

Recommendations

1 Implement a systematic framework to improve mental health outcomes for people, such as the Mental Health at Work Commitment, a framework of six standards with key actions linking to practical tools and guidance.

2 Focus on prevention to manage the risks of stress and poor mental health. See the Health and Safety Executive's range of practical tools to help managers start a conversation with team members (see Stress Risk Assessment, including the Talking Toolkit).

3 'Management style' is the second main cause of work-related stress, showing how negative the impact can be if managers aren't equipped to go about their people management role in the right way. Ensure they are trained to have the right behaviours to nurture trust-based relationships with team members.

4 Encourage staff to practise self-care, such as by following a healthy routine for diet, sleep and relaxation, and make sure they know how to access the wellbeing support on offer, such as counselling, occupational health as well as external mental health charities and helplines.

Don't neglect financial wellbeing

Our survey highlights the negative impact money worries can have on people's wellbeing, with almost a quarter (23%) agreeing that poor financial wellbeing is a significant cause of employee stress in their organisation. And yet this area of wellbeing has consistently failed to receive the same attention as other wellbeing areas year-on-year in our research. With the UK in recession and large-scale job losses under way, many workers will be feeling acute pressure on their household incomes. Financial wellness should therefore form a crucial element of every employer's holistic wellbeing programme. This view is backed up by the CIPD's latest *Reward Management survey*, which highlights the vital role employers, as income providers, play in workers' financial wellbeing.

When asked in the *Reward Management survey* why employers don't have an employee financial wellbeing policy, the main reasons are that senior management doesn't view it as a priority; or see the need; or have the time, money or expertise. Our recommendations set out below provide a good starting point for the kind of steps an organisation can consider in developing a financial wellbeing offering. The CIPD also has a range of useful reports and guides to support organisations wanting to improve their employees' financial wellbeing.

Recommendations

• Implement a financial wellbeing policy. For small employers this can involve signposting to independent advice and guidance, while large employers should be able to implement a comprehensive policy that's part of a wider wellbeing strategy supported by a budget.

• Review your pay and benefits policies to ensure they are fair and equitable. Pay employees the Real Living Wage where possible.

• Use a range of communication channels to educate people about their reward package and the importance of making long-term financial provisions. Target financial education at key points in people's working lives; for example, ahead of maternity leave.

• Help people to plan for their retirement; for example, by providing access to guidance and independent advice, and by promoting phased retirement options. Consider offering pre-retirement courses/training for individuals approaching retirement.

- Step up your support for people experiencing financial difficulties, such as by signposting to external sources of free advice like the Money and Pensions Service. Consider other options, such as 'early pay access' to help people manage their finances.

Create an open culture around disability

We need a considerable step change in employment practice to make significant progress in closing the disability employment gap. Too few people with a disability or health condition are receiving the support and flexibility they need to remain in work and thrive. For real progress to be made, employers need to take a systematic approach to ensuring their organisation is inclusive to disabled people and those with long-term health conditions; this means looking critically at how they operate, from their processes and procedures to their leadership, culture and people management practice.

Although it's encouraging that most organisations are convinced of the moral and business case for workforce reporting on health and disability, our findings also show that the majority lack the systems and infrastructure to collect data effectively. Data is only meaningful if it's understood and acted on to inform real, sustainable change. A good starting point would be to adopt the Government's voluntary reporting framework for disability, mental health and wellbeing. This could help to pave the way for the introduction of a mandatory reporting framework in the future.

Recommendations

- Promote greater awareness and understanding of disability issues across the organisation. Do you have effective voice channels to encourage genuine consultation on disability issues that include people with lived experience?
- Promote and embed flexible working practices across the organisation so that people with a health condition and/or disability can flex their hours and responsibilities to suit any fluctuating health needs. Do you have a policy and/or guidance to help managers and individuals agree supportive workplace adjustments?
- Encourage leaders to speak publicly about the importance of inclusion. A senior-level sponsor for disability inclusion doesn't need to have a particular protected characteristic in the first place, but they do need to commit to understanding the issues people face at work and dedicate time and resources to addressing them.
- Consider joining the Disability Confident scheme that provides access to practical support and guidance to make the most of the talents disabled people can bring to your organisation.
- Support a climate of disclosure. Create an open culture around health and disability issues; this is a key step in fostering an environment where people feel comfortable to disclose their condition and seek support.
- Transparency and reporting can support cultural change in your organisation. As such, consider adopting the Government's voluntary reporting framework.
- Provide training and guidance for line managers. Line managers are not medical experts, but they can develop an understanding of someone's condition – and how it impacts on their ability to perform their role at certain times. Check out the CIPD and Department for Work and Pensions' guide for line managers on recruiting, managing and developing people with a disability or health condition.

Understand absence in the context of the pandemic

This has been an extraordinary year for people's health due to the huge impact of COVID-19. For the first time in over 20 years, we are unable to provide a reliable headline absence rate for benchmarking purposes. In any case, while absence levels can be a useful indicator of people's health, they can never provide a full understanding of the overall wellbeing of the workforce.

Preceding editions of this annual survey have consistently urged organisations to look deeper than absence levels to understand the underlying factors driving people's attendance, absence and behaviour. For example, 'presenteeism' and 'leaveism' can have long-term implications for people's health and productivity

People working when unwell can be more harmful to people's health and the business than absence, not only because they could transmit infection (a risk brought starkly to the fore in the context of the pandemic), but because their illness could worsen. They may be more susceptible to costly mistakes and take longer to recover.

Working outside of normal working hours, or 'leaveism', is another unhealthy habit. People need time away from work to switch off and relax, or to recuperate if they are ill. If people are feeling the need to work when they shouldn't be, it's likely to be a sign of underlying organisational issues driving that behaviour. It's no coincidence that unmanageable workloads are once again by far the biggest cause of work-related stress; this could be one factor why some people feel they can't complete their work in the time available.

Recommendations
- Analyse your absence data to help inform a deeper understanding of the health and organisational factors driving behaviour and attendance. Combined with evidence from other sources (such as occupational health, employee surveys and management feedback), use it to inform your wellbeing activity.
- Work with managers to identify presenteeism and leaveism in their teams, and the underlying reasons prompting this behaviour. Are workloads, targets and deadlines realistic? Do managers inadvertently promote a culture that expects people to be available when they shouldn't be?
- Develop strategies to tackle presenteeism and leaveism, such as:
    - guidance for managers to help them spot the warning signs
    - positive employee communications – for example, to encourage people to take annual leave
    - healthy role-modelling by senior leaders – for example, not working when ill
    - a culture based more on outputs than inputs
    - encouraging healthy use of digital technology so that people can 'switch off' out of work hours.

Train line managers to spot warning signs
Line managers play a fundamental role in supporting people's wellbeing. As well as managing absence and returns to work, they implement most of the policies, like flexible working, that can make a real difference to the quality of people's working lives and wellbeing. Managers are often the first port of call if an employee is stressed or struggling, or needs a workplace adjustment to support their health. Crucially, managers should be checking in regularly on people, spotting any early warning signs of poor wellbeing and referring to expert sources of help where needed.

Managers need to treat people as individuals and take into account their personal – as well as work-related – issues. This means having the competence to nurture trust-based relationships with those they manage, so individuals feel they can talk about any work or wellbeing issues. Organisations expect a lot of their line managers in terms of the people management and wellbeing aspects of their role. To rise to this challenge, managers need effective support themselves. Managers' own health and wellbeing could be at risk if they are being charged with responsibilities they are not confident or competent to carry out. Organisations need to address the stubborn gap between the increasing responsibility placed on managers to support people's health and wellbeing, and the investment managers receive to ensure their capability and confidence.

Recommendations
- A line manager's behaviour, and the culture they create in their team, is the biggest influence on an employee's work experience. By improving their management capabilities, managers can improve their own wellbeing as well as that of their team. The CIPD has developed a suite of resources to help managers explore and develop their management capability.
- Check out our short practical guide for people managers, which outlines six steps every manager can do to reduce stress and help their team thrive at work. These include **reflecting on one's management style**, **treating people as individuals** and providing them with **positive and constructive feedback**, as well as **leading by example** to promote healthy working habits.
- Do your managers feel comfortable having conversations with people about their mental health? Consider training and guidance to increase their confidence: use the CIPD and Mind's *People Managers' Guide to Mental Health* to help managers facilitate conversations about stress and mental health.

Next steps

Download *Health and Wellbeing at Work,* **in partnership with Simplyhealth, to read the full 2021 report, including forewords from the CIPD and Simplyhealth, detailed analyses, sector-based summaries, background to the survey, and appendices.**

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