

27 Apr 2021

Wellbeing at work

Understand the links between work, health and wellbeing, and how every employee group has a role to play in adopting an organisational approach to employee wellbeing

Introduction

Fostering employee wellbeing is good for people and the organisation. Promoting wellbeing can help prevent stress and create positive working environments where individuals and organisations can thrive. Good health and wellbeing can be a core enabler of employee engagement and organisational performance.

This factsheet focuses on wellbeing in the workplace, explaining why it matters. We outline the domains of our wellbeing model, and look at the role of different stakeholders in cultivating a healthy workplace.

What is wellbeing at work?

Promoting and supporting employee wellbeing is at the heart of our purpose to champion better work and working lives because an effective workplace wellbeing programme can deliver mutual benefit to people, organisations, economies and communities. In our Growing the health and wellbeing agenda report, we show that healthy workplaces help people to flourish and reach their potential. This means creating an environment that actively promotes a state of contentment, benefiting both employees and the organisation.

There's now a much broader understanding and application of holistic health and wellbeing approaches in many workplaces. However, it's also clear that there's an implementation gap, with many organisations not yet embracing the health and wellbeing agenda to full effect.

Investing in employee wellbeing can lead to increased resilience, better employee engagement, reduced sickness absence and higher performance and productivity. However, wellbeing initiatives often fall short of their potential because they stand alone,

isolated from the everyday business. To gain real benefit, employee wellbeing priorities must be integrated throughout an organisation, embedded in its culture, leadership and people management.

The people profession is in a unique position to drive forward this agenda, to convince senior managers to make it a priority, and ensure that line managers accept and uphold its importance its importance.

Wellbeing in the time of coronavirus

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised concerns about people's health and wellbeing to the top of the business agenda. Employers play a vital role in protecting employees from the risk of infection by implementing stringent public health measures like social distancing. This also means supporting people to work from home where possible and putting in place vital safety measures for site-based workers such as health and social care staff.

The implications of the virus outbreak for everyone's health and wellbeing during and after the pandemic are significant, including their mental health. Our 2021 [Health and wellbeing at work survey report](#) found that more than 80% of organisations were concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on employees' mental health.

Employers should ensure they have a holistic framework in place to support people's physical health and safety, and [mental health](#), and offer sources of help such as counselling, an employee assistance programme and [occupational health](#) services where possible. They need to ensure [line managers](#) in particular have the ongoing guidance needed to support their teams, so they can have sensitive conversations with individuals and signpost to expert help where needed. All employees should be encouraged to have a good self-care routine including a healthy approach to diet, relaxation and sleep.

There's more on wellbeing in our coronavirus [factsheet](#) and [webinars](#) in our [Responding to the coronavirus hub](#). CIPD members can use our [Wellbeing helpline and resources](#).

A holistic approach to wellbeing

The importance of employee health and wellbeing has become more widely recognised in the UK over the past decade.

While risks to workers' health from physical hazards still exist, fatal and non-fatal injuries to employees have fallen significantly since the introduction of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.

However, there's been a rise in the number of reported mental health issues over the past 10 years, and it's well recognised that in many cases the main risks to people's health at work are psychological. This has led to a growing recognition of the need for employer wellbeing practices to address the psychosocial, as well as the physical, aspects of health and wellbeing. Our 2021 Health and wellbeing at work survey report shows that organisations' wellbeing activity is increasingly focused on mental health with most organisations taking steps to support mental health and address workplace stress. There's also a significant increase in the use of employee assistance programmes and training to build personal resilience.

The survey also found evidence of a range of unhealthy working practices such as 'presenteeism' (people working when unwell), with at least three-quarters of organisations reporting presenteeism among people working from home as well as in a physical workplace. Seven in ten have also observed some form of 'leaveism', such as working outside contracted hours or using holiday entitlement when unwell or to work, over the past 12 months.

These findings are not signs of a healthy workplace. Employers need to look beyond absence statistics to understand the underlying factors, such as unmanageable workloads, that are driving unhealthy working practices.

Complex changes in the world of work mean that people now face other organisational and wider environmental pressures. Our 2020 Good Work Index survey reported a worrying drop in employees' health and wellbeing over the previous three years.

Employers also need to think carefully about how their wellbeing strategy builds on, and aligns to, an organisation's health and safety policies.

The value of employee wellbeing

Traditionally, when articulating the business case for managing people's health, employers focused on quantifying the negative impact of ill health such as the cost of sickness absence. Recent thinking reflects a more positive business case.

PricewaterhouseCoopers research, commissioned by the Health Work Wellbeing Executive, points to 'a wealth of evidence' suggesting a positive link between the introduction of wellness programmes in the workplace and improved business key performance indicators.

Our 2020 Health and wellbeing at work survey identified the top three benefits of employers increasing their focus on employee wellbeing:

- Better employee morale and engagement.

- A healthier and more inclusive culture.
- Lower sickness absence.

Our research shows that health and wellbeing shouldn't have to be treated as an 'add-on' or 'nice-to-have' activity by organisations – if employers place employee wellbeing at the centre of their business model and view it as the vital source of value creation, the dividends for organisational health can be significant.

The UK government has launched a [Voluntary Reporting framework](#) to support employers to report on disability, mental health and disability. This will help to ensure that an employer's approach to inclusive employment and progression is integrated across the organisation and taken seriously by managers and employees.

The CIPD's role in fostering employee wellbeing

We have set an aspirational agenda for workplace health and wellbeing. An effective employee wellbeing programme should be at the core of how an organisation fulfils its mission and carries out its operations, and should be strategic. It's about changing the way business is done.

Our wellbeing pyramid model

The key domains of wellbeing

We've identified seven inter-related 'domains' of employee wellbeing, guided by the principle that an effective employee wellbeing strategy needs to go far beyond a series of standalone initiatives.

There's no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to designing a health and wellbeing strategy; its content should be based on the unique needs and characteristics of the organisation and its workforce.

The underlying elements include examples of workplace initiatives and activities to support people's health and wellbeing.

1. Health

- **Physical health** - Health promotion, good rehabilitation practices, health checks,

wellbeing benefits, health insurance protection, managing disability, occupational health support, employee assistance programme.

- **Physical safety** - Safe working practices, safe equipment, personal safety training.
- **Mental health** - Stress management, risk assessments, conflict resolution training, training line managers to have difficult conversations, managing mental ill health, occupational health support, employee assistance programme.

2. Good work

- **Working environment** - Ergonomically designed working areas, open and inclusive culture.
- **Good line management** - Effective people management policies, training for line managers, sickness absence management.
- **Work demands** - Job design, job roles, job quality, workload, working hours, job satisfaction, work-life balance.
- **Autonomy** - Control, innovation, whistleblowing.
- **Change management** - Communication, involvement, leadership.
- **Pay and reward** - Fair and transparent remuneration practices, non-financial recognition.

3. Values/Principles

- **Leadership** - Values-based leadership, clear mission and objectives, health and wellbeing strategy, corporate governance, building trust.
- **Ethical standards** - Dignity at work, corporate social responsibility, community investment, volunteering.
- **Inclusion and diversity** - Valuing difference, cultural engagement, training for employees and managers.

4. Collective/Social

- **Employee voice** - Communication, consultation, genuine dialogue, involvement in decision making.
- **Positive relationships** - Management style, teamworking, healthy relationships with peers and managers, dignity and respect.

5. Personal growth

- **Career development** - Mentoring, coaching, performance management, performance development plans, skills utilisation, succession planning.
- **Emotional** - Positive relationships, personal resilience training, financial wellbeing.

- **Lifelong learning** - Performance development plans, access to training, mid-career review, technical and vocational learning, challenging work.
- **Creativity** - Open and collaborative culture, innovation workshops.

6. Good lifestyle choices

- **Physical activity** - Walking clubs, lunchtime yoga, charity walks.
- **Healthy eating** - Recipe clubs, healthy menu choices in the canteen.

7. Financial wellbeing

- **Fair pay and benefit policies** - Pay rates above the statutory National Minimum/Living Wage, flexible benefits scheme.
- **Retirement planning** - Phased retirement such as a three- or four-day week, pre-retirement courses for people approaching retirement.
- **Employee financial support**- Employee assistance programme offering debt counselling, signposting to external sources of free advice (for example, Citizens Advice), access to independent financial advisers.

Everyone has responsibility for fostering wellbeing

Adopting an organisational approach to employee wellbeing carries with it distinct responsibilities for particular employee groups.

People professionals

People professionals have a lead role to play in steering the health and wellbeing agenda in organisations. They need to ensure that senior managers regard it as a priority and integrate wellbeing practices into the organisation's day-to-day operations.

They need to communicate the benefits of a healthy workplace to line managers, who are typically responsible for implementing people management and wellbeing policies. They need to work closely with all areas of the business and provide practical guidance to ensure that policies and practices are implemented consistently and with compassion.

Senior managers

Lack of senior management commitment to wellbeing can be a major barrier to implementation. Senior managers are crucial role models, and line managers and

employees are more likely to engage with health and wellbeing interventions if they see senior leaders actively participating in them. Senior managers have the authority and influence to ensure that wellbeing is a strategic priority embedded in the organisation's day-to-day operations and culture.

Line managers

Much of the day-to-day responsibility for managing employees' health and wellbeing falls on line managers. This includes implementing stress management initiatives, spotting early warning signs of stress, making supportive adjustments at work, and nurturing positive relationships.

Yet our surveys consistently show that 'poor management style' is a main cause of work-related stress. In our 2021 Health and wellbeing at work survey, nearly one third of respondents blamed management style for work-related stress. Managers are important role models in fostering healthy behaviour at work, and this finding shows how harmful the impact can be if managers aren't equipped with the competence and confidence to go about their people management role in the right way.

Managers also need to understand the impact their management style has on employees and the wider organisational culture at work.

Occupational health

Occupational health (OH) is a specialist branch of medicine focused on health in the workplace. For this reason, OH practitioners are likely to work closely with people professionals and those responsible for health and safety in a workplace.

Employees

Employees also have a responsibility for looking after their own health and wellbeing, and will only benefit from wellbeing initiatives if they participate in the initiatives on offer and take care of their health and wellbeing outside work as well. Employers can encourage employees' involvement by communicating how staff can access the support and benefits available to them. It's also important that the organisation seeks employee feedback about its current offering so it can learn how to shape existing initiatives and plan new ones.

Useful contacts and further reading

Contacts

[Wellbeing helpline and resources for CIPD members](#)

[Acas – Health and wellbeing](#)

[Health and Safety Executive \(HSE\)](#)

[Council for Work and Health](#)

[NHS Health at Work Network](#)

[Mental Health at Work gateway](#)

[Workplace Wellbeing Charter](#)

Books and reports

COOPER, C. and HESKETH, I. (2019) *Wellbeing at work: how to design, implement and evaluate an effective strategy*. London: Kogan Page and CIPD.

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH AND CARE EXCELLENCE. (2015) *Workplace health: management practices*. NICE guidelines, No NG13. London: NICE.

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH AND CARE EXCELLENCE. (2017) *Healthy workplaces: improving employee mental and physical health and wellbeing*. Quality Standard QS147. Manchester: NICE.

WADDELL, G. and BURTON, A.K. (2006) *Is work good for your health and well-being?* London: Stationery Office

Visit the [CIPD and Kogan Page Bookshop](#) to see all our priced publications currently in print.

Journal articles

BEVAN, S. and BAJOREK, Z. (2018) Workforce health: Why 'good work' trumps fruit and pilates evangelism every time. *HR Magazine*. October, pp42-44. Reviewed in *In a Nutshell*, issue 82.

HOWLETT, E. (2021) *Should HR be worried about long Covid?* *People Management* (online). 28 January.

KELLIHER, C., RICHARDSON, J. and BOIARINTSEVA, G. (2019) All of work? All of Life?

Reconceptualising work-life balance for the 21st century. Human Resource Management Journal. Vol 29, No 2, April. Reviewed in [*In a Nutshell*, issue 87](#).

SUFF, R. (2019) Financial wellness is the poor relation of employee wellbeing. *CIPD Voice*. No 18, 26 April.

SUFF, R. (2019) Health at work: prevention is better than cure. *CIPD Voice*. No 19, 5 July.

SUFF, R. (2021) COVID-19: How well have organisations looked after people's health and wellbeing. *CIPD Voice*. Issue 29. 28 June.

CIPD members can use our [online journals](#) to find articles from over 300 journal titles relevant to HR.

Members and *People Management* subscribers can read articles on the [People Management](#) website.

This factsheet was last updated by Rachel Suff.