

How organizations can promote employee wellness, now and post-pandemic

Article

Accepted Version

Laker, B. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0850-9744> and Roulet, T. (2021) How organizations can promote employee wellness, now and post-pandemic. MIT Sloan Management Review. ISSN 1532-9194 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/94575/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Publisher: MIT Sloan School of Management

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online



Why are companies hiring Chief Wellness Officers? And do they improve wellbeing?

Employees have never worked harder: productivity is up [10.1 percent](#) in the second quarter of 2020, the biggest increase since 1971, caused by workers transitioning from offices to their homes in congruence with Covid-19 restrictions. And while this period has undoubtedly improved business efficiency, mental wellbeing is suffering; [94 percent](#) of workers have experienced stress within the last 12 months. While this isn't surprising given that [Oracle](#) concludes 2020 is the most stressful year ever, 78 percent of workers believe the Coronavirus pandemic has severely affected their mental health; 40 percent are making more flawed decisions and 90 percent conclude that newfound work-related stress is affecting their home lives. The culmination of which is causing unprecedented levels of depression (up 53 percent), anxiety (up 55 percent), and even PTSD (up 32 percent), which is further exacerbated by a growing backlash against employee surveillance.

So, how are companies responding?

Typically, companies have mitigated employee stress through the delivery of wellness programs; in 2019, more than three-quarters of workplaces ran one, and [91 percent of participants](#) reacted favorably. However, these programs relied on physical settings and have consequently suffered since the introduction of remote working, affected by reduced face-to-face time with colleagues and restricted access to facilities, including breakout spaces, gyms, and watercoolers. As a result, more than half of wellness programs have paused despite their chronic need, now more than ever.

So, within some innovative companies emerges an innovative solution: an actual Chief Wellness Officer. Make no mistake, these aren't tokenistic hires. Their C-suite mandates are strategic positions stemming from a genuine need to bring more wellness into the post-pandemic workplace and help workers overcome their newfound stresses associated with the 'new normal.'

But do they create the desired impact on employee wellbeing?

Our latest research sought to find out. We surveyed 500 Chief Wellness Officers across ten countries and 15 vertical markets, including Banking, Consumer, Engineering, and Oil and gas. We wanted to understand how these individuals influence wellbeing of their predominantly remote working employees, and our questions included (among others):

- What events and wellness benefits have you introduced? What impact has occurred? And how do you know?
- How do you gather feedback from employees? And does this feedback inform program design? If so, how?
- What surprising insight have you learned during your tenure?
- Where do you envisage the future of the CWO role heading?

Triangulating data from participant responses and assessing employees' wellness levels enabled us to conclude Chief Wellness Officers' effectiveness as very high. Employees who received CWO support for more than three months reported more affective commitment

(39 percent more) and work engagement (38 percent more) and less intention to turnover (reducing churn by 24 percent) than those who did not. Moreover, this had an impact on workers' positive emotions at work, with (42 percent) of respondents feeling more hopeful, in contrast to those without CWO support, who felt more scared (31 percent) and distressed (45 percent) about their futures. We observed a transformational effect on collaboration, with over 68 percent of respondents agreeing that their CWO helped them connect with their co-workers psychologically (41 percent), resulting in a stronger bond between them. With regard to wellbeing, 92 percent of participants felt CWOs improved their work-life balance, leading to a decrease in anxiety (31 percent) and stress (by 35 percent).

Therefore, our study recommends the hiring of a Chief Wellness Officer today, or in the very least, mandating someone internally to serve in this capacity. To effectively implement this position (or get the most out of your existing CWO), we present seven steps to take.

1. Talk to your employees. It may be simple to host a virtual wellness event, offer staff a wellbeing stipend, or provide entertainment at the next all-employee meeting. What isn't simple, yet imperative, is asking your team what they need. When was the last time you took a pulse check of how your employees were feeling, particularly with working remotely? With a world that feels like it's changing by the hour, it's critical to get a sense of how your employee's wellbeing is changing too. Whether this is a survey sent out to the staff or if it's an ask of supervisors to have an honest conversation with their team, it's time that companies learned to actively listen to their employees without first assuming what they need. You want to know how to improve wellbeing in the workplace? Start by asking the people you're serving.

2. Set better work-life boundaries. Part of the reason that productivity has spiked this year is that people are working longer hours, which is largely due to people working where they live in addition to the hustle culture that existed pre-pandemic. Take a cue from Microsoft and look to the work-life boundaries your company can implement. Another trend that is skyrocketing this year to consider is embracing [the four-day workweek](#). According to Digiday, this schedule change fuels productivity and places higher importance on a work-life balance. Simpler solutions can include [no meetings on Mondays and Fridays or no emails after work](#) — which France incorporated back in 2017. Placing bookends to the workday can greatly improve employee satisfaction and give everyone a bit of their life back.

3. Provide interactive programming and wellness resources. Virtual wellness and [personal development](#) both saw a boom in 2020, and that's a good thing for companies rethinking their culture programming. We spoke to one company giving its 2,500 employees access to virtual yoga classes as part of their new remote wellness initiatives. Use your CWO to encourage employees to release their stress during these sessions. One Workplace Wellness Survey Report found that employees in companies who offer employee wellness programs and initiatives are 67 percent more satisfied than employees in companies who don't have an employee wellness program.

4. Model wellness for your team. As a leader, it's not enough to say you prioritize wellness and provide a few options. You must also walk the walk (and not just talk the talk on your company's intranet or internal communications). Each manager, supervisor, and team lead

has a responsibility to represent the company's emphasis on wellbeing. Show your team that you value their wellbeing by valuing your own. This isn't just a role for HR or the C-suite. By you emphasizing wellness yourself, it'll help motivate your team members to do the same. Over time, this is how a company can genuinely embrace the importance of wellbeing when people are really acting upon it because it feels like the norm. Perhaps this looks like actually using your vacation days, being open about a block on your calendar that's tied to a therapy appointment, or even as small as providing suggestions for a great personal development book you've read. It's all about openness and action when it comes to modelling wellness for your team.

5. Make wellness part of the annual review. Whether your company does reviews annually, quarterly, or monthly, make wellness a part of the process. In this review, find out if your employees feel taken care of and get a report card for the company on how you're providing for your staff's wellbeing. This isn't just a moment for managers to provide team members with individualized feedback; it's a critical moment to get feedback from them on whether they feel valued, heard, and cared for as a member of the company. Not only does that show people that the company truly cares, but it also gives the company an opportunity to constantly elevate wellbeing offerings, benefits, and more.

6. Revisit your company's values. If we learned anything as a society in 2020, it's that we need to take a hard look at the way we live, work, and play. As a company, it's essential to take a moment and reevaluate how you show up for your employees — and not just your clients. Take a good, hard look at your company values and see if they still hold true. If they do, consider how you're incorporating these values in your future workplace. If they don't, figure out where you need to shift. Leaders must leverage this moment to self-reflect on what kind of company they want to be. And this isn't just about satisfying current employees, either. According to [Deloitte's research](#), it's important to Gen Z to work at organizations whose values align with their own. So, use your CWO during the hiring process to work out which candidate best adopts your company culture. If you hire people who already have the company values, then the company culture will strengthen with every new hiring, rather than weaken. This is especially important when working remotely, as face-to-face time is non-existent.

7. Finally, work with your CWO to implement their plans and ideas for improving wellness. It's your job as a senior colleague to help ingrain these changes into the company culture. Employees with high workloads often view manufactured fun as an obstacle to their work. They would instead work harder and faster to get the job done, and not risk falling behind. That's why management teams have to work with CWOs to create an atmosphere where having fun is valued and supported by management. This fosters a culture where organic fun can flourish, meaning employees feel more comfortable at work and more invested.

So, what's next?

Perhaps you read all of this, and you're convinced, but wonder how to convince the rest of your leadership team to hire a CWO, or even prioritize wellness during a global pandemic. This international event showed us just how important it is to take care of one another and

how we're all connected — both in the workplace and at home. And, if you're still not convinced, the benefit of taking care of your employees *will* outweigh the cost of doing so, because we conclude significant returns on investment following the appoint of a CWO: employee loyalty improved by 79 percent, which retained top talent within companies, saving them time, money, and resources required to acquire new hires; 87% of workers we spoke to said they now consider wellness offerings when choosing an employees; and 79 percent think that CWO informed wellness programs positively impact the company culture.

The future of work is upon us, and it's up to companies to embrace the shift or fall behind. It's time to rethink your company as a place for human beings to thrive instead of just grind. After all, the average person will [spend a third of their life working](#) — and so, don't they deserve some much needed wellness in their lives, especially at the moment?