

The evolution of the HR function – from a policy-and-recruitment, administrative-type department, to one of strategic importance – has been a shift of focus in many areas of business, zooming out of the ‘nitty gritty’ and taking a broader view.

In terms of wellness, this necessitates HR moving from a narrow concentration on administering the sick leave or performance management policies to taking an active role in enabling the health and performance of staff.

According to health and performance consultant Richard Sutton of Sutton Health, employee wellness is critical and means that “each and every member of the organisation is able to perform their professional role to their greatest potential”.

“So often our performance obstacles are not based on extrinsic factors such as demands, pressures and challenges, but rather our inability to thrive under pervasive strain due to emotional, physical or cognitive fragility. Fortunately, an expertly constructed wellness programme can successfully address these performance barriers,” Richard says.

Real ROI

It’s a move that promises a return on investment (ROI) not just in talent retention, but in terms of productivity too. In fact, according to Life Employee Health Solutions (EHS), part of the Life Healthcare Group, 80 percent of employers who measured the ROI on their employee wellness programmes have found positive returns.

Dr Leanne Mandim, chief operations manager for Life EHS, says that “wellness in the workplace has moved from a nice to have to a must have”, and that there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that employers reduce costs by investing in the health and well-being of staff – both in terms of direct costs (providing healthcare) and indirect costs (due to absenteeism and reduced productivity).

“The increasing demands of today’s fast-paced business environment means employees need more personal health, wellness and lifestyle support than ever before. It’s well documented that happy, healthy employees are more efficient and more productive,” she says.

More than policies and punishment

Directly in line with this trend, locally listed insurance software firm Silverbridge recently announced that they had repositioned and renamed their HR function to “People Wellness”, “reflecting the importance of our people and their well-being.”

Commenting on the move, people wellness executive Ruth Wotela said that although they continue to manage the standard HR functions (including formalising the structural organisation of employees; recruitment; disciplinary handling; performance management; and the administration of employee benefits and payroll), the new People Wellness team is focused on “empowering our employees, creating a great working environment, and promoting the values that drive behaviour inside the organisation and with our clients”.

The company’s role

Richard argues that it is an organisation’s duty to play the “principal role” in staff wellness – because our work and work environments are the two main sources of the societal stress burden.

He cites research from Harvard Business School and Stanford Graduate School of Business which found that work-related stress results in more than 120,000 premature deaths a year in the US, and added billions of dollars to further burden the healthcare system in the country. In the UK, he says, a study found that 44 percent of individuals cite their work environment as the primary stress in their lives.

“My point is that work cultures, environments, and policies have a greater effect on people’s health than we realise,” he adds.



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– *Richard Sutton*

On the flip side of this, then, there is an inherent opportunity for a strategic HR team or manager: “From an organisational perspective, this can be seen as an advantage of sorts, as it puts the wellness ball in the corporate court. By implementing subtle behavioural and policy shifts, companies can reignite productivity and engagement not to mention reduce the health burden.”

Lead by example

Taking a wellness-led approach is an achievable goal for organisations of any size, but it does require an acute awareness of company culture – whether you’re building from the ground up or transforming an established business.

Nicky James is one of the founders of Tribeca Public Relations, an independent PR agency. When she and her co-founder Cian Mac Eochaidh established their company in 2006, they took a conscious decision to create the kind of workplace environment they themselves would want to work in. For them, this means an open-plan office and flat structure, generous holiday and family responsibility leave, flexi-time hours, and an understanding of the give-and-take nature of overtime work (lieu time). They

also offer life coaching to staff to support them to grow professionally or to tackle their personal struggles.

It was their intention to create a positive, responsive environment in these ways, but that’s not to say there is no structure to these wellness “benefits”. Rather, every single benefit has a policy, Nicky explains, so everyone knows exactly where they stand. Our philosophy is “happy staff equals happy clients,” she says, and as a result, she believes that they reap the rewards in terms of high staff and client retention rates.

Terence Moolman is the head of global HR for Syspro, an ERP software solutions development company with around 500 staff – the bulk of which are based in South Africa. Syspro also offers a range of wellness-targeting benefits, from healthy staff lunches, exercise spaces, and a subsidised smoothie bar, to an employee assistance app (through a partnership with Discovery) to provide emotional support to staff as and when they need it.

He calls these wellness tools or opportunities but stresses that company responsibility goes far