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Wellness matters... Two case studies

Looks at two companies which have been proactive in providing health and wellness initiatives to help boost employee engagement, morale and performance

With employees working longer hours to meet tight deadlines, not taking all their holiday entitlement, eating the wrong foods on the go, and with little information or drive to fit any exercise or emotional balance into their already busy day - it's little wonder that stress has become the most common reason for presenteeism in Ireland today. Below we outline how two companies have been proactive in providing health and wellness initiatives to help boost employee engagement, morale and performance.

The results of the Behaviour & Attitudes Survey released in 2015 showed that while around half of Irish businesses considered stress and mental health to be a priority in their workplace, only 16% of the companies surveyed actually had a wellness policy or wellness programme in place. Data from the CIPD in 2016 indicates that just two in five of us are working at peak performance at any one time.

One of the leading experts in occupational psychology, Professor Sir Cary Cooper of Manchester Business School maintains that presenteeism is drastically reducing our productivity. In a recent CIPD interview Sir Cary spoke of the problem of presenteeism and said, 'You're present but you're not delivering. And really what we need are healthy people, engaged, wanting to work. Working hard, but not necessarily long, because we don't need long.' He added, 'We know from research if you consistently work long hours you will get ill...and we're turning up early, we're staying late, we're sending emails from home at night...and we're not recovering from the pace, the load, and the insecurity of work.'

What is 'wellness'?

The term 'wellness' is not an easy concept to define. Some describe wellness as the state of being in optimal mental and physical health. The World Health Organisation describes

it as being 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'. That is to say, wellness is more than being free from illness, but rather it is the full integration of our physical, mental and spiritual selves. Depending on who you talk to, there are as many as seven different dimensions to wellness including: occupational wellness, physical wellness, intellectual wellness, emotional wellness, social wellness, spiritual wellness and environmental wellness.

The existence of so many different strands of wellness demands that companies take a more holistic approach to providing employees with the type of support and wellness initiatives they need to become happier, healthier and more dynamic human beings. An individual's health and well-being are the outcomes of the constant interaction between all the various dimensions, with each dimension of wellness being interrelated with the others. Therefore, any lack of attention to any one dimension can result in less than optimal development of the person and can have a detrimental affect on their work performance, home life, and self development potential.

Wellness in practice - Northern Trust

Companies of all sizes are now recognising the value of implementing bespoke wellness programmes and initiatives which are providing really tangible health and well-being benefits to their workers. According to Lorraine Walsh, 2nd VP Compensation & Benefits in Northern Trust, 'We have always been aware of the benefits of a healthy body and a healthy mind, so as part of our commitment to employee well-being and wellness, we have been working alongside our partners, Vhi, to deliver robust service benefits to our employees'.

The company supports over 1,250 employees in Ireland and in recent years has been working proactively with its EMEA and Global Benefits team to make available a wide range of wellness activities to its young workforce. 'We are currently focusing on emotional well-being and mental health. Based on prior years the most popular utilised service is our annual *Wellness Screenings* initiative. The results of which are rolled up by location, to produce aggregate reports, allowing us to identify what support, information or guidance we need to be providing to our employees', added Lorraine.

Employee participation has been very enthusiastic and feedback has been extremely positive. 'Our people really appreciate the on-site screenings delivered by the Vhi nurse. It is effectively a free, mini-MOT of their health and their personal results are delivered same-day and are completely confidential. The service is very professional and helps each employee to get an accurate picture of their current health status', said Lorraine. Other initiatives have included information sessions on financial planning and there are plans to

commence webinars on the topics of dealing with stress at home and in the workplace. This will mean that employees can access these services from the privacy of their own workstation or from their laptop at home.

One of the big advantages for companies is that the aggregated reports can highlight overall trends in workplace health at a high level and so it can be a straightforward matter to remedy the situation. According to Lorraine, 'For example, if the aggregate report shows that cholesterol levels for staff are higher than optimal levels, we can arrange to have a specific seminar to help employees reduce their cholesterol and maintain good health.'

Wellness in practice - Keelings

With a staff of more than 850, Keelings is another company committed to improving the wellness of its workforce. One of the most successful producers of fresh fruit and vegetables in the country, most of their employees are based in North County Dublin. Aideen Hartnett, HR Coordinator for Keelings said, 'The first *Well-being Day* took place in 2012, and the initiatives have grown stronger from year to year. In 2015 we set aside an entire week for well-being activities.'

The company provided a range of holistic activities designed to support the physical, emotional and spiritual wellness of employees. These included seminars on how to deal with stress, smoking cessation, and weight-watching. In addition, Keelings provided sessions of massage therapy, reflexology and reiki - all designed to instil a sense of calm, healing and relaxation among the recipients. According to Aideen, 'We were amazed with the very positive reaction from employees to these initiatives. The participation level was high with over 500 employees taking part in one or more of the activities. For many participants it was very uplifting and a lot of fun.'

'The *Wellness Screening* was hugely popular. Employees were especially pleased with the Vhi nurse who monitored their body mass index, cholesterol levels, blood pressure, heart rate, and other vital indications. The service provided was very professional, with a detailed report issued to each participant providing helpful and beneficial bespoke information', added Aideen.

She continued, 'Our employees were really appreciative of having the screenings carried out onsite which meant they did not have the inconvenience of having to travel to another location. In addition, they weren't required to cover the cost of the screening, which they consider to be a very worthwhile employee benefit.'

Return on investment

Measuring the positive effects of wellness is not a straightforward process. It can be difficult for HR professionals to precisely correlate increases in productivity directly to investment in wellness activities. However, Sir Cary maintains that the business case for well-being interventions is very well established. He says, 'I mean there's absolutely no question about it. We know there is something like 0.4 (40%) relationship between a well-being culture and productivity, but in terms of sickness absence it is well established.'

From speaking with HR professionals operating in companies with a wellness mandate there is no doubt that operating a wellness scheme can result in a win-win situation for all concerned. Investing in wellness has been shown to have a significant effect on employee performance. Wellness initiatives improve employee engagement; improve increased performance and productivity; decrease absenteeism; and decrease presenteeism. From the company perspective, embracing wellness leads to a more attractive workplace; an increase in the retention of senior and experienced employees; decreased costs in training and sick leave; and increased revenue and productivity.

While the benefits of implementing wellness initiatives are clear to see, it is important that organisations take the decision to embed wellness into their company culture. It requires a well thought out strategy supported by robust policies and ideally, it is wise to consider partnering with a reputable wellness solutions provider to help deliver the maximum results. Wellness is not a gimmick, nor is it a trend which is likely to go out of fashion. It is a genuinely useful and valued concept and it is here to stay. As a means of ensuring a more content and productive workforce, as well as a key employee retention tool, the consensus seems to be that wellness is certainly worth the investment.