

# Total Well-being: Moving past the physical domain

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In a recent Employee Benefits News article, Jeffrey Pfeffer, a professor of organizational behavior at Stanford University's graduate school of business, was quoted at the annual Great Place to Work conference in New Orleans as saying, "Health and wellness programs are virtually meaningless if a workplace culture is bad." (Giardina, 2014). Researchers have been studying the effect of workplace culture on workforce health for years. According to Edington, effective and sustainable behavior-change efforts must encompass the overall culture of the workplace. If individuals are to make a sustainable behavior change, they must be in an environment that supports the change. If someone changes a behavior but returns to the same unhealthy environment that caused or aggravated the behavior, the chances are pretty good that he or she will return to the original behavior (Edington, 2009). So, where is the disconnect for employers in developing workplace health management strategies, and how can they create a culture fostering employee well-being? It begins by looking beyond the symptoms to take a closer look at the root causes.

Rath and Harter identify five essential elements to overall well-being. They include career, social, financial, physical and community well-being. While 66 percent of people are doing well in at least one of these areas, only 7 percent are thriving in all five. Struggles in any one of these domains can damage an individual's well-being and negatively impact his or her daily life. Support of all five areas as part of a comprehensive workplace health management strategy is important in creating the ideal culture. For example, the authors' research showed those who were actively disengaged in their careers were nearly twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression, and as levels of engagement increased, risk factors such as cholesterol and triglyceride



levels improved. Career well-being and engagement were found to also be closely linked to management behavior. If your manager focuses on primarily your strengths, the chance of being actively disengaged is only 1 percent, versus 40 percent if your manager ignores you (Harter, 2010).

According to the 2013 Towers Watson Staying@Work survey, stress is the top lifestyle challenge for employees (Towers Watson/NBGH, 2014), and employers are starting to pay attention to how it impacts workforce health and overall organizational performance. When designing wellness initiatives to deliver to employees, companies often look at where their costs are in terms of disease states and risk factors identified through biometric screenings. Many times there is little emphasis on what could actually be causing high blood pressure or heart conditions. Stress comes from many areas in an individual's life, and by addressing only the nutritional and exercise habits of a population, efforts will fall short of having the desired impact. Employers are beginning to recognize the role environment plays in reducing risk factors and subsequent expenses linked to chronic conditions, particularly workplace environmental factors. The Staying@Work survey also indicates employers are taking a more strategic approach by establishing a culture of health as their top priority and an essential factor for success. More programs drawing employees into healthy lifestyles are not enough. There is a greater need to create a healthy culture, improve employee engagement with their own health and better manage employee mental health, anxiety and stress.

There are numerous ways employers can impact the different well-being domains beyond just the physical, which is where many initiatives begin and end. It starts with a well-articulated strategy to include defined goals and objectives, as well as a strong connection to the organizational mission. Communication of this strategy will help employees feel tied and committed to the cause. Educating employees to be more informed consumers of health care was in the top priorities of health and productivity programs according to the 2013 Staying@

Work survey. Offering tools and resources to help employees maximize benefits available and make wise health care choices could impact their financial well-being as well as their physical health. Providing opportunities for employees to work on teams to complete projects could enhance their social well-being. Company-sponsored community projects could offer employees an opportunity to volunteer and get more involved socially with others. Career well-being could be enhanced by managing to employees' strengths, as well as making work a fun place to be. Management training may be an important element as leaders set the tone.

Gallup found that engaged workers are the lifeblood of their organizations and companies with a highly engaged workforce have significantly higher productivity, profitability, customer ratings, less turnover and absenteeism and fewer safety incidents. The Gallup engagement studies have found that only 22 percent of US employees are engaged and thriving in their overall lives, and when this is the case, they are more likely to have strong work performance, even in challenging times. Organizations need to focus their efforts in addressing the whole person and creating a work environment that cultivates a thriving workforce.

#### Works Cited

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